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THE SPARKLER STARTED FORWARD WITH THE LIGHTNESS OF A FEATHERWEIGHT.

OR,
KENT KEENE'S
- : KNOCK-OUT.

A STORY OF THE
RED RAIDERS OF BLUE JACKET.

BY JOHN W. OSBON,
AUTHOR OF "SPORT FROM ST. LOUIS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE OLD CHIEF'S PLOT.

"We are betrayed! There is a spy among
us!"

Fierce that cry as it rang through the nar-

row, rock-walled corridor of a mountain stronghold, and the speaker, a man of athletic build, threw himself heavily against another whom he had detected listening beside a half-open door, hurling him headlong across the threshold.

But the spy was young and agile. A quick grasp at the edge of a heavy table within saved him from a stunning fall on the rough stone floor, and with marvellous celerity he was upon his feet again, when, almost instantly, his drawn revolvers sent shot after shot at his assailants.

Assailants, for there were three—two white men and an aged Indian chief—in that rude stone-floored chamber. Alarmed by that startling cry, they had leaped to their feet, weapons in hand, to fire rapidly at the daring mountain detective, thus suddenly discovered among them.

But luck was against the trio of bandits—for such they were—and with the venturesome detective, for when the smoke lifted two of the men were no longer visible, while the old Indian chief was seen to be crouching beside the body of the one who had thrown the spy into the room.

The two captives were also within that grim chamber. These the detective at once released, saying:

"Rise, gentlemen, and secure weapons, if you can, for others of the Mountain League may be upon us in a moment, and we must be prepared to hold our own."

The command was scarcely obeyed when the heavy trampling of many feet was heard in the corridor without, and a squad of United States regulars burst into the rock-ribbed room.

Even in the excitement and confusion of that moment, the old Indian felt a gentle pressure upon his arm. The black eyes of the prostrate outlaw were peering into his grim face!

"Hist! Black Bear!" the outlaw breathed; "I am hurt but little, but we are hemmed in, and your cunning must save us."

"Get me into the side chamber if you can, and from there we must reach the magazine, get arms, and escape by the secret passage; that or we hang! Be quick!"

The redskin nodded, a hopeful look flashing from his sunken black eyes. The soldiers entering the room confusedly, he deftly dragged the outlaw into the room or passage adjoining the living place, and closed the heavy slab door, which he pinioned securely.

That done, the younger outlaw leaped to his feet.

"Well done, Black Bear!" he exclaimed, jubilantly. "Now the way is clear to the magazine. Let us be off."

"Yes, yes! My son, we must not tarry," the old chief declared, crossing the chamber with trembling steps. "To remain is death, while if we escape we may retrieve all."

Then, with Black Bear slightly in advance, the pair quitted the side or blind chamber and entered a gloomy passage-way.

Descending a short flight of steps cut in the stone, they found themselves in yet another corridor, from which they turned to enter the magazine—a low, square room, dimly lighted by a lantern suspended from the ceiling.

Weapons of many kinds were hanging upon the walls, and when they had secured the door father and son—for such they were—the supposed "chief" being a white man disguised—armed themselves thoroughly; then, lantern in hand, the younger outlaw led the way downward through a trap in the floor.

"We must secure all the money in the treasure chamber, my son," advised the old man, as they entered a zigzag fissure running through the heart of the rocks. "The band is destroyed; we are the proper heirs, and all now is ours!"

"There is a great deal, father?"

"Many thousands, my son, in cash, nuggets, and diamonds, besides the other booty which we must leave."

"Good! It will put us on our feet again. We can organize another band and yet secure the fortune we now have got to abandon."

The old chief shook his head in a decided way.

"No, Keene, my son, we must adopt a different plan," he declared. "A fortune may be secured—a round million, perhaps—but there must be none to share it with us."

"If help is needed, hire it, and let the men work blindly, for none must know you as Kent Keene or suspect the end you have in view."

"Then you have arranged the plot, father?"

The old outlaw uttered a chuckle as he twisted his claw-like hands together.

"Oh, yes, my son! I have schemed my whole life long, both for vengeance and for gold, and now, when all else has failed, there comes the opportunity for a brilliant stroke, if your cunning and courage are equal to it."

"Try me, father," and the younger man turned eagerly to the wretch who called him son.

"Ay, ay! And it's the last chance I can give you, boy, for I am old—very old."

"But here is the treasure cave, and while we secure the money and gems I will tell you all that I can, for everything will depend upon your shrewdness and nerve."

An opening in one wall of the fissure confronted the pair, and, holding the lantern before him, Kent Keene, the outlaw, stooped and entered, followed by the chief.

A mere pocket in the rock was that "cavern," but it was filled with heavy wooden boxes, each secured with a chain and padlock to prevent removal by any of the League, whose loot it was.

Then the chief, drawing from his bosom a bunch of keys, unlocked one of the boxes or chests, the smallest one of the lot, and disclosed to the eyes of his son a dozen or more packages of bank notes, all of large denominations, while from beneath them he drew a small buckskin pouch of precious stones.

"Here is a fortune in itself, my son, but not enough for your needs and mine," the chief observed. "Stow the bills and the diamonds upon your person, and take all, for I have with me enough for the present."

"And now I will tell you what you must do."

"You yourself must turn detective, and put your wits against those of one of the keenest criminals the world has ever known."

Kent Keene started.

"Turn detective, you say?" he exclaimed, both voice and manner betraying uneasiness.

"Ay, detective, for there is much you must learn."

"In the camp of Blue Jacket, down near the northern boundary of the great basalt plains, lives a man known as Solomon Zebender. He is a miser, shrewd and cunning. He is rich—very rich, it is said—with the spoils of a long life of secret but successful outlawry, although he lives in a mere hovel."

"But the bulk of his wealth was made by one stroke."

"Fifteen years ago he came one day upon a man wounded and dying beside a Colorado trail, and this man, Ishmael Estell by name, was rich in mining property of the first class."

"Zebender was not wholly hardened. Moreover, his cupidity had been aroused by words Estell let fall in his delirium, and so he carried the wounded man into the nearest mining camp, and carefully nursed him back to life."

"But he had learned too much to permit Estell ever to escape. Under the guise of deep and true friendship, he worked his way so thoroughly into the miner's esteem and confidence that there were no secrets between them. Thus Zebender knew exactly what Estell possessed, the location and valuation of all his property, and that the miner was

a widower with two children, a boy and a girl."

"This boy was some ten or twelve years old, the girl an infant of two, and they were the sole heirs of Ishmael Estell."

"Then Estell was suddenly attacked by a strange malady, which baffled the little skill possessed by the camp's doctor, and in a few days he died."

"His last act was to name Solomon Zebender executor of his estate and guardian of his children, without bond."

"This was the end for which Zebender had plotted, and now the fortune was fairly within his grasp, for he converted all the property into cash within the year, deserted the children, and disappeared."

"This fortune, my son, you may win, and it is a noble one, for under Zebender's care it has steadily grown."

"Estell's son was killed, so rumor says, several years ago, while searching for proof of Zebender's rascality; but the daughter lives, and I have reason to believe she is in the camp of Blue Jacket, and known to the miser."

"So, go you to Blue Jacket, in some deep and cunning disguise, ferret out Edith Estell, and make terms with her for the recovery of the fortune. That done, boldly confront Zebender and accuse him of the murder of Ishmael Estell, and wrest from him the property."

"Here in this packet which I give you is proof of the crime, found years ago by my secret agent, and if the miser refuses to disgorge you can send him to the gallows."

"Do this, my son; act promptly, and all will be well for you in the future, for with a portion of the Estell estate at your command you can forsake the paths of outlawry and live like a gentleman."

That the younger outlaw was deeply impressed his face showed, even by the dim light of the lantern, and there was a glow in his dark eyes, showing him ready and anxious for the task.

"I will do it!" he declared. "And if your information is correct, I should certainly win."

"But in the event of my failing to find Edith Estell—what then?"

The old man's sunken black eyes flashed balefully.

"You must not fail!" was the response.

Kent Keene silently secreted the money and jewels upon his person, and slipped the proof of Zebender's guilt into his money belt.

Then the old chief spoke again, his voice sinking almost to a whisper, and for a half hour father and son talked most earnestly.

But the pseudo-Indian, the whilom chief of the bandit league, had come there, not to flee, but to end his vile career, for suddenly he tottered and fell to the stone floor, when from his mouth and nostrils burst a blood flow which quickly brought unconsciousness and death!

CHAPTER II.

RED BELT, THE SPORT.

Blue Jacket lay sweltering in the heat and the glare of the August sun one Saturday afternoon when one of the half-dozen roughs lounging on the piazza in front of the Idaho House descried a lone horseman coming down the trail from the northern camps.

"Heigho, pards! Jes' look up yen-way, fer ef thar ain't a galoot with wheels under his hat I misses my guess," the fellow sang out, lazily rising and pointing through the dazzling glare at the approaching rider. "Whoof! Et makes me dry ter think of et!"

Then a bustle of excitement took the place of the inert laziness so characteristic of that particular group, and all crowded to the end of the piazza to get a better view of the horseman.

Down the trail at a rapid canter he came, although his horse was plainly in distress.

"Et's a puffectly safe bet, gen'lemen, thet ther critter's a heathen, ef thar's not mighty good cause fer haste," Major

Marker declared, with an indignant toss of his shiny bald head.

"Hossflesh is hossflesh, an' thet's a good one he's on, or I'm no jedge. An' I've allers allowed es how a good hoss is better a heap sight then a bad rider."

Then the major retreated to the bar-room, sat down, and patiently awaited the arrival of the stranger.

Strangers were a rarity in Blue Jacket, and were seldom seen except on the semi-weekly stage days. In the whole history of the camp but two had appeared as this one was coming, and both had been in full flight before a vigilance committee from the upper camps.

"An et's a puffedly safe bet thar's a screw loose some'ers behind this one," the major sagely asserted.

And this was the opinion of the group on the porch, as well; but as the horseman drew near they stopped their running fire of comments and filed slowly into the saloon.

Saturday afternoon was a half-holiday in Blue Jacket, and many of her denizens were there, gathered around the various card tables, at play, but all knew that something out of the ordinary was about to happen when that solemn-visaged row of roughs and idlers came filing in, and for the moment all play ceased.

Then a swift clatter of hoofs at the door announced the stranger's arrival, and a moment later he stepped into the saloon.

A tall man, splendidly built and strikingly handsome was he, with black eyes, hair, mustache and imperial.

He was garbed like a sport, with short coat of blue velveteen, gold buttons, frilled shirt, and flowing silk tie, black doeskin pants, and patent-leather shoes. A six-inch belt of red leather, fastened with a massive gold buckle, encircled his waist, supporting a knife and a brace of revolvers.

A bold, a dashing-looking fellow he certainly was, fresh as a daisy despite that hot and dirty ride, and as he stepped up to the bar, just inside the door, he dropped a banknote on the polished hard wood, and cheerily sang out:

"Hallo, hallo! Come up, pards—everybody! There's a new sport in camp! Let's drink to better acquaintance!"

The invitation was accepted with alacrity by every man in the room save one, and that one was Cool Cy, the lessee of the card tables.

For some reason, probably unknown even to himself, the gambler had instantly formed an instinctive aversion to the sportive stranger, and he quietly remained in his seat behind the faro layout.

"Come, pard!—come drink with me to our better acquaintance," the stranger urged, laughingly, as he noticed the gambler's indifference.

"I am called Red Belt, the Sport, and you will find me a square man when squarely treated, but a terror to crooked deals and brace games."

Then, to the intense surprise of Blue Jacket's denizens, Cool Cy rose from the table and without hesitation approached the bar.

The gambler was a bully, morose and sullen, and all had expected trouble instead of acquiescence.

But Cool Cy was determined to quarrel and to force a fight, right there and then, and his cunning brain had instantly conceived a plan whereby the odds would fall in his favor.

Taking his place beside Red Belt, he filled his glass; then, as he started to raise it to his lips, suddenly paused and turned to the sport.

"Did I understand you to insinuate that I might be running a brace game?" he demanded, slowly, and speaking each word with the utmost distinctness, while his cold gray eyes looked fixedly into the black orbs of the stranger. "Or that I was in the habit of treating people other than squarely?"

Red Belt laughed.

"Well, now, it may have sounded that way," he admitted, carelessly. "But as you are—"

Swift as lightning the hand of Cool Cy rose, to dash the glass of beaded liquor in the eyes of the sport; but, swifter yet were the movements of Red Belt, for a sudden swerve of his head took him out of line with the flying contents of the glass, while, instantly, his right fist shot out, knocking the quarrelsome gambler off his feet.

Of course, all was confusion, for there could now be but one ending to that quick and bitter quarrel.

With a bound, Cool Cy sprang erect, revolver in hand, but the weapon of Red Belt stared him full in the face, and he shrank back—unnerved.

"Sorry, sir, but you would have it so," the sport exclaimed. "Had you heard me out, we would have been friends, not enemies."

"Perhaps!" sneered Cool Cy.

Red Belt smiled.

"No, it's just as I say," he assured. "I came here to hang out my shingle, but not to hunt trouble. Like yourself, I am a sport, looking for business."

"That's just the rub; Blue Jacket Camp is not big enough for two first-class men in our line, and as I was here first I propose to stay, so I reckon you'll have to look further."

The gambler spoke in an arrogant, menacing tone.

Red Belt looked at him in surprise.

"Upon my word, mister man, you have a peculiarly fresh way of taking things into your hands," he exclaimed, a wicked glitter in his black eyes; "but, as you have laid down the law, one of us must go, I take it."

"That is true!"

"Very good. Here's a proposition: We'll leave it to a vote of the gentlemen here. Let them decide which shall go."

"I admit that your being first on the ground gives you the right of way. To offset that, I'll put up a thousand dollars against your interest here."

"What say?"

Cool Cy hesitated a moment, then gave assent to the proposition. Both men put away their weapons, and the preliminaries were quickly arranged.

Then the vote was taken.

Much to the surprise and chagrin of Cool Cy, he found himself almost unanimously elected to leave Blue Jacket, whereupon, to the surprise of all, he at once packed up and departed without protest.

"You will understand, gentlemen, that the trouble was not of my seeking," Red Belt remarked, when the gambler had disappeared from view over a distant rise in the trail.

"Oh, no! He bluffed, and you called," the landlord assured. "It's my honest opinion, too, that you have done Blue Jacket a good service in driving Cool Cy out, for he was quarrelsome, and his many shooting scrapes have given the camp a bad name."

Others voiced the same opinion, and the sport was assured that he need look for no hostility because of the gambler's discomfiture.

Then Red Belt announced his intention of stopping a few weeks in Blue Jacket, and arranged with the landlord for board and lodging, paying in gold for a month in advance.

That done, he went to the stable to see that his horse had been properly cared for; then he sought his room and prepared for supper.

The landlord had announced that the gaming privilege of the hotel would be offered at auction immediately after the supper hour, and as it was the leading resort of the camp, it was generally believed that the bidding would be most spirited.

The Red Belt Sport was early on hand, and when the privilege was offered he promptly raised every bid until the disgusted competitors had all dropped out, whereupon he quickly closed the deal with the landlord, paying the bonus in cash, and at once took possession.

Then the two dealers who had been employed by Cool Cy offered their serv-

ices and were engaged, and the gambling hall was declared open for business.

Every one seemed anxious for a chance to try his luck against the new sport, and until midnight business was exceptionally brisk, with the bank winning steadily.

But at that hour there came a lull. A majority of the crowd were cleaned out; others, under the impression that Sunday would be a great day because of the departure of Cool Cy, wished to turn in in time for a night's rest, while a yet smaller number were so thoroughly under the influence of the liquor which they had been imbibing so freely that they were unable either to play or to get out.

So the tables were almost wholly deserted, and the Red Belt Sport gave orders to close the games for the night.

Just at this juncture three men, each in a different part of the room, began to move slowly but steadily toward the faro layout, where sat Red Belt in person.

There was nothing suspicious in these movements, save that they were simultaneous, yet Red Belt instantly jumped to the conclusion that he was about to be attacked and robbed.

But he sat unmoved, chatting with a miner who lingered after his fellows had departed; yet his revolvers were out and ready under cover of the table, for he was determined to teach the camp roughs and toughs a lesson they would remember.

His suspicions were speedily verified.

The trio reached the faro layout at exactly the same moment, one facing the gambler and one upon either hand at the ends of the table; then from the miner who had engaged his attention came the stern order:

"Hands up, Red Belt, for we are here to avenge the insult put upon Cool Cy!"

"Don't draw, or you'll—"

The heavy crack of the gambler's weapons filled the hiatus, and springing upon the layout, shot after shot rang through the room.

The two dealers had sprung to their employer's assistance, but the battle was over, for on the floor lay one of the assailants, badly "plugged," while the others had sought safety in flight—the gambler not having shot to kill.

The Red Belt Sport had not escaped unscathed; a ball had pierced his left arm, while another was imbedded in his thigh, but he stood his ground unflinchingly, wounded as he was, until the injured man had been carried from the room and the place closed for the night.

It was the last attempt made to avenge the banishment of Cool Cy. Red Belt had "earned his spurs," and he was promptly hailed as the new "chief" of Blue Jacket.

Then, by his kindness, he won the friendship of the wounded rough, Ute Jack, while he was laid up, for the sport took him each week an amount equal to the wages he was wont to earn in the mines when at work, and paid all expenses accruing as cheerfully as he could have done for a life-long friend.

In the cabin occupied by Ute Jack were two miners, pards of the rough, who had been injured in the Good Luck Mine a few days before, and they, too, were thoughtfully provided for by the new sport.

"While helpless, they are dependent upon Jack," the gambler explained. "Give them what they need, and bring the bill to me."

The denizens of Blue Jacket to a man voted Red Belt "a clean, white sport," and the gambling hall at the Idaho House flourished as it never had before.

That there was a mystery in the life of the gambler none could doubt, and as the months rolled by he was often strangely absent from his chair behind the faro layout, but no questions were asked, for the man was feared as well as admired.

CHAPTER III.

RED BELT'S CRIPPLES.

We have said that the Red Belt Sport won his way by kindness to the heart

of the man he had been forced to wound so severely, and that they became friends.

That this was the case all in Blue Jacket knew, for as soon as he was able to hobble about Ute Jack called at the Idaho House and paid his respects to the sport, by whom he was entertained right royally.

Naturally, it was suspected that a deep game was afoot, in which Red Belt was to be the victim; but when the days had rolled on until nearly a month was gone, the still helpless rough gave a striking evidence of his fidelity to the strange man who had first wounded, then befriended, him.

The "cripples," as Ute Jack and his two pards were popularly called, had gotten in the habit of hobbling out of camp to a cool, secluded gulch, a short distance up the trail, every afternoon, where, with a pack of cards and a flask of liquor, they would while away the drowsy summer hours.

Usually they were a noisy, boisterous lot, so that one passing up or down the trail would be pretty sure to detect their presence, although snugly hidden from sight in a small glen opening off the gulch. But at times the cards would lose interest and they would then loll about in the grass, quietly chatting or silently smoking and drinking, until the shades of evening came.

It was on one of these days that the acknowledged leader of the trio, a tall, awkward, loose-jointed rough known as Sugar Foot, made an important discovery.

Interest in the game had flagged. Ute Jack had thrown up his hand in disgust after an hour's play, and turned over on his back, with his pipe between his teeth—an example which Pious Pete was not slow to follow.

This left Sugar Foot in a restless mood, and after some minutes of smoking and growling he picked himself up and entered the winding fissure leading into the gulch.

A few days previously the ruffian had noticed faint traces of a pathway winding up one wall of the fissure to the rocks above, and he now determined to explore it.

Climbing slowly and steadily to the top of the wall, he found himself at the foot of a gradual slope densely covered with dwarfed pines. The narrow pathway was there more plainly marked, and seemed to lead straight up the mountain.

"Some one hes a den up thar," the fellow decided, his small, dark eyes gleaming suspiciously. "Is et a 'strike,' er jest a—"

Voices in the gulch below startled him at that moment, and ending his musings abruptly, he crept stealthily to the verge and peered down.

Two men were there, both known to the ruffian, and he quietly stretched himself upon the rock to listen, for he was a sneak and a spy by nature, and he knew that it was something out of the ordinary which had led to that secret meeting.

One of the men was a Mexican named Pedro Gomez, a gambler, and he had been the most prominent competitor against the Red Belt Sport for the gaming privilege at the Idaho House. Report said that he was a treacherous scoundrel, implacable in his hatred, and given to deeds dark and secret.

The second was Dare-Devil Dick, a bravo of the camp, with a considerable following, and one ever ready to sell his services for gold, no matter what the deed.

At the moment Sugar Foot looked down Gomez was speaking.

"You are sure, Senor Dick, that you can rely upon your men?" he asked.

"Oh yes, Pedro; fer ther gold yer offers they will do ther deed," was the prompt reply.

"And they do not know that I employ them, Senor Dick?"

"I'm no fool, Pedro!"

"No, senor; but Red Belt is very popular in the camp, and did they but know

that I employ them to remove him they might revolt, for I am not liked," and the Mexican scowled blackly.

"No, Pedro, ye're not ace-high, thet way, an' I'm free ter say I don't love yer, nuther," was the bluff response. "But yer gold hes a good ring, Pedro, an' es thet's what we're arter, yer kin depend on us."

"Six of us will be thar at nine o'clock ter-night, an' we'll fill ther Red Belt so full o' lead he'll never know what hurted him."

"It is well, senor. Fail not."

Then the musical clinking of gold pieces came to the ears of the spy upon the rocks, and he eagerly craned his neck to get a better view of the villainous transaction.

Ten double eagles fell in the hand of the bravo. That transaction consummated, with a parting injunction Pedro Gomez turned and strode away, followed a few minutes later by Dare-Devil Dick.

"Uh, huh!" muttered Sugar Foot, as the bravo disappeared down the gulch, and, turning upon his back, he stared blankly at the sky.

But he was a quick-witted scoundrel, and after a moment's thought he hurriedly scrambled down into the fissure and rejoined his companions in the glen.

Cursing them for their drowsiness, Sugar Foot explained what had happened, and suggested a counterplot.

That night, sharply at nine o'clock, the raid was made, just as Dare-Devil Dick had promised Pedro Gomez it should be; but the Red Belt Sport was surrounded by friends, and the plot proved a signal failure; the ruffians were repulsed and driven from camp, while the bravo chief and the Mexican were captured and thrown into the calaboose.

The "cripples" came in for their full share of the glory, and thus was every doubt as to the sincerity of the friendship they professed for the Red Belt Sport completely removed.

Red Belt was conspicuous at the trial of the two desperadoes. He was instrumental in securing their discharge, and as time rolled on he became more and more popular.

With a nerve that it seemed nothing could shake, a dead shot, and a master of wrestling and boxing, he became known throughout the camps as the champion of Blue Jacket, and it was said that bold indeed would be the man to cross his will.

It was early in March that Blue Jacket awoke one morning to a genuine sensation.

The cabin of Solomon Zebender, standing upon the mountainside some distance from the camp, had been entered by masked men during the night and the miserly old mine owner robbed.

Not only robbed, but tortured.

The rough men of Blue Jacket declared that being robbed was in itself the severest torture which could be visited upon the old miser. But the burglars had evidently thought differently, for Solomon showed a pair of badly blistered hands and feet in support of his assertions when called upon by the marshal, Long Dave Sly.

The alarm had been given at an extremely early hour, and in a very peculiar way.

In the employ of Zebender, as man of all work, was a great hulk of a fellow of most vicious aspect, named Honeyfang, whose chief duty, it was said, was to sleep in a miserable lean-to back of the cabin.

But on the night in question Honeyfang had slipped out about eleven o'clock and gone down to the camp for a drink. Meeting some acquaintances, he had protracted his stay until day was dawning, and then, fearful of the miner's wrath, hastened home, considerably the worse for liquor.

On entering the lean-to he was astonished to discover the door leading into the cabin ajar, and was the next instant startled by a series of deep groans.

Fearful of the worst, he entered the cabin, only to find Zebender and his daughter bound and gagged.

The appearance of the cabin pointed to robbery as the motive, and pausing only long enough to release the girl and her father, he hurried out, and with revolvers and voice raised such a hubbub that the marshal and a number of men soon made their appearance.

"Hey! Sly Dave, ther ole man hes bin robbed," the big ruffian howled, at the top of his voice, as the official came into view. "Robbed an' bucked an' gagged, an' ther cabin tarned up si' down!"

That the ruffian was exaggerating but little the marshal quickly discovered.

But to the surprise of everybody, Solomon Zebender seemed to wish the matter dropped.

"I don't keep money lying around loose," he explained. "The fellows didn't get much—not enough to pay them decent wages for their night's work, and I don't reckon it's worth while to make any fuss about the matter."

"You see, I am not much hurt. There were three of the fellows, all masked, and strangers to me, and when they didn't pick up as much as they had expected to, they tried to blister me into telling where to find more."

"But that, gentlemen, was impossible, for I am a poor man, despite current belief to the contrary; I can honestly say I don't possess a thousand dollars to my name."

"I am simply an agent for others, and at that only to a limited extent."

"That is true," the daughter declared, timidly. "We are poor—very poor, and it was only yesterday that father and I were discussing the advisability of my seeking employment somewhere in the camp."

"Wal, people don't always git their neighbors rated right—not by a jugful," the marshal asserted, while firmly fixed in his mind was the belief that the miser was deliberately falsifying.

"But ef yer don't care ter push ther case, 'tain't my lookout, an' I'll go back ter bed. Ef I happens ter ketch on ter ther critters, though, I reckon Blue Jacket won't be none too healthy fer them."

And with that the marshal and the men with him withdrew.

Then the miser proceeded to give his bodyguard, the valiant Honeyfang, an artistic tongue lashing.

The burly rough took it quietly, waiting patiently until Zebender had exhausted his stock of expletives and invectives; then a drunken leer crossed his face, and he stepped forward and looked unflinchingly into the blazing orbs of his employer.

"Thet'll do, boss! An' don't let et happen agin!"

"You knows, an' I knows, an' ther gal knows, what them blame cusses war arter, an' thet et weren't eny gold ye got hid!—nixey!"

"They were arter thet thar leetle secret I kerry right up hyar," and the rough laid his forefinger upon his bulging forehead. "They burned yer hoofs ter make yer squeal thet—not open up yer gold!"

"Don't give me any more o' yer funny business, fer I 'members thet leetle Colorado sarcumstance very 'stinctly, an' I reckon Jack's es good es his master. See?"

Solomon Zebender shivered and his swarthy face grew white. He glanced around apprehensively, his small black eyes glaring with terror.

"Hush, man—"

"An' I say, ole pard, while we're at et, thar's another leetle p'int I wants settled," the ruffian continued, rudely breaking in on that weak-voiced admonition. "I reckon you've noticed es how, sence I bin a-shackin' hyar with yer, I've got almighty lonesome, an' now I axes yer, plum', straight out, ter make me yer son-in-law."

"Et'll keep thet leetle matter all in ther fam'bly, an'—"

A scream of rage burst from the girl and Honeyfang, ducking his head just

in time to avoid a swinging blow from Zebender, turned and fled.

About ten o'clock that morning the Red Belt Sport left camp with gun and dog, bound for a day's shooting.

Taking the trail leading to the northward, he walked leisurely onward for nearly a mile, when he came to a narrow defile leading off to the westward.

Entering, he pushed onward until he had found a point at which the south wall might be easily scaled; there he ascended the mountain and turned to the south, a course which would take him directly past Blue Jacket, but at such a height he would not be seen.

Provided with a powerful field glass, at times he paused and carefully scanned the camp and the lower trail, as well as the course he had covered.

A mile or more below the camp he descended and entered a small ledge cavern.

When he reappeared his face was covered with a mask, while a rubber cowl and long cloak concealed his head and body. Dog and gun had been left in the cavern.

Descending yet further, the Red Belt Sport entered a gulch, and from a cavity in the rocks drew a folded sheet of paper, on which was scrawled:

"Chief: We tried the game, but it wouldn't work. The miser swears it is all a lie—that he never knew Estell, much less his daughter. Searched the shack for papers, but found none. What next?"

There was no signature.

Biting his lips in vexation, the Red Belt Sport reflected a moment, then at the bottom of the paper wrote the one word:

"Wait."

CHAPTER IV. THE MISER.

"Zetta, I am expecting a caller—an agent of the law. His business with me is private. Crippled as I am, I shall have to leave it to you to devise means to keep Giles away, while the caller is here."

So spoke Solomon Zebender to his daughter, when alone with her one morning a fortnight after the raid of the mysterious burglars.

"Well, don't worry, father; I will do the best I can," the girl replied, in her matter-of-fact way.

"But when do you expect this caller?"

"At any hour. The letter you mailed two weeks ago was addressed to him, but the mails are uncertain, for the Red Raiders are becoming bold and the coach that day was held up at Dead Man's Canyon."

"But he will come, I feel assured, and Honeyfang must not hear what passes between us."

"I shall do the best I can," Zetta again declared.

"And then, father?"

"I shall keep my promise to you, girl. We'll go to some small place in the East, where I can be at peace with the world. We'll be poor—very poor, but I have lived so that the change will not affect us."

"We'll be stripped of all the property?"

"Of every dollar, girl, save a few hundreds which rightfully belong to me."

A look of quiet content came into Zetta Zebender's dark eyes.

"That is well, father!" she exclaimed, caressing the grim old face. "Make full restitution—yield everything not your own, and I shall be happy!"

The miser sighed.

But the plans of father and daughter were not to be carried out.

Three days passed, and the expected visitor failed to appear. Anxiety weighed heavily upon the miser. He grew fretful and ill at ease.

"There is something wrong," he would mutter.

"Yes, father, something is wrong," Zetta had to admit, but bravely added, "it

will all come right yet, father, I am sure."

Soon, however, came a great change, and all knew that old Solomon Zebender, the miser of Blue Jacket, was dying.

He had been suddenly stricken speechless, and lay in agony—bitter, intense mental agony.

The shadow of a great wrong lay heavily against his soul, now trembling upon the verge of eternity.

Could he but speak, there was yet time for atonement—time to amend the past; but his tongue was paralyzed. Hot, dry, and swollen, it clove to the roof of his parched mouth.

His hands, yet showing traces of those cruel blisters, lay powerless beside him. He vainly strove to lift them, that the words he wished to utter might be written.

His swarthy old face had taken on that peculiarly waxen hue which so often presages the nearness of death, and his whole appearance, with the single exception of his eyes, was that of a corpse.

Beady, black, deep-set, and small, these eyes turned upon the persons beside the couch, with a look at once appealing and terrible, while his thoughts, unworded, ran:

"All—all that I have, would I give for the privilege of speech! Help me, why don't you? Heavens! Will you let this monster, Death, drag my secret into the grave? Ah, I love you, my dear child! May heaven guard and keep you! And you, Giles—you will not help me!—you are powerless, you say? Zounds! Could I but reach you, even Death would shrink from me to you!"

Thus those eyes, strangely powerful at all times, but eloquent now with voiceless agony, seemed to speak, as old Solomon Zebender lay with the dew of death upon his swarthy brows.

The doctor shook his head slowly.

"I dun reckon Ole Zebender hes salted his last mine," he mused, reflectively, his bloodshot brown eyes shifting covertly from Giles Honeyfang to the bowed head of the daughter. "An', by ther same token, he's skint his last tenderfoot!"

"Et's mighty queer, too, but et's kivered so almighty deep I cain't jest reach ther cause o' his sickness, else I'd be mighty apt ter fix et. Thar's sign enough, but o' what?—thet's ther question!"

"Apperplexy, you think, Doc?"

Giles Honeyfang asked the question cautiously; yet there was a trace of suggestiveness in his husky tones. In fact, a shrewd listener would have decided that the miser's henchman was desirous of just that verdict—apoplexy.

But the liquor-soaked brain of Doctor Jeremiah Samuels failed to catch the suggestion, if suggestion it was, and he again shook his head, saying:

"Naw, et's never thet. Et's p'ison!"

"P'ralysis, mebbe?"

"Naw, et ain't p'ralysis. It's p'ison—rank p'ison, dug-gun ye! Ain't I dun said so? Blamed ef I knows how, but ther critter's got a dose—a mighty big dose et thet! I cain't tell jest what et is; but thar he be, an' et's p'ison—no less!"

The doctor spoke in a decided manner. The earlier symptoms had betrayed the presence of poison, and upon those symptoms the man of medicine, once a skilled practitioner, had proceeded. But treatment had been too long delayed, and the case was hopeless.

This view was extremely distasteful to Honeyfang, but it seemed to meet the approbation of those eyes looking out from that waxen face upon the couch.

"I—I—cain't go thet idear, Doc," Honeyfang protested, drawing his huge hand sharply across his shaggy brows. "Et'll go hard with her, too," with a swift gesture at the slender figure crouched beside the bed. "His on'y child, min' ye, an' et must hurt her ter know—but, I tell ye, Doc, thar's a mistake somewhar! Sol Zebender never—never suicided!"

In harshly sibilant strains came that declaration, and then, as if suddenly aroused from her dull apathy by that cunningly veiled suggestion, Zetta Zebender sprang to her feet and confronted

the speaker, her tearful black eyes gleaming with a sudden burst of scorn and anger.

"Scoundrel! Ruffian!" she exclaimed, her voice pitched in a ringing, metallic strain. "My father is not dying by his own hand! It is accident or murder!"

With arms akimbo, Giles Honeyfang stared hard at the grief-stricken girl, his protuberant gray eyes slowly filling with an expression of scornful incredulity, not unmixed with venomous hatred.

An ugly-looking customer was this ruffian. Full six feet in height, with broad, thick shoulders and heavily muscled arms and legs, he betrayed in each clumsy movement the strength of a veritable giant.

His poll was thatched with a mass of bristling, sandy red hair, of wiry harshness. Mustache and beard, foul with tobacco stains, were of the same color, and added not a little to the general repulsiveness of his broad, flat face.

A long, vivid scar extended from temple to chin, and the low but bulging forehead was also seamed and scarred, while the nose had evidently been broken.

He was roughly dressed, and a stout leather belt encircled his ponderous middle, supporting a brace of revolvers and a long knife. As he glared savagely at Zetta Zebender his grimy hands unconsciously shifted from his hips to the butts of his weapons.

"Say et ag'in, an' say et slow, ye dainty bit o' ladybird!" he growled, roughly shaking off the thin, wasted hand Dr. Samuels had ventured to place upon his arm. "Ef ye dare hint—"

"It is accident or murder, I say!" flashed the girl, almost desperate in her grief and despair, as she swiftly moved from behind the bed and boldly advanced upon the ruffian. "You were with him when—"

Checking the words trembling upon her tongue, Zetta Zebender turned abruptly.

A door behind her had opened, and a stranger stood within the death chamber.

CHAPTER V.

SHASTA SAM, THE SPARKLER.

The man who had thus suddenly and unannounced entered the home of the Zebenders was a most remarkable-looking personage.

At least six feet and two inches in height, he was as straight as an arrow and splendidly formed, with broad shoulders, trim waist, and straight, sinewy legs.

His face was of handsome mold, stern and fearless, yet fair and smooth as a woman's, with eyes large, lustrous, and black as darkest night.

Long mustaches of a bright golden-brown color shaded his finely chiseled lips, and thick tresses of soft and silky hair of the same rich, warm tint, lay in clustering ringlets upon his shapely shoulders.

That this man was a sport of high degree even Zetta Zebender knew at a glance. His snow-flecked cap and overcoat were of the finest sealskin, and in keeping with the rest of his attire. The elegant undercoat of jet-black velvet was trimmed with buttons of solid gold, the front of the immaculate, frilled white shirt studded with diamonds, while the knot in the flowing black silk tie at his throat was fastened with a massive pin, representing a half-closed hand clutching a diamond as large as a hickory nut.

High-topped patent-leather boots encased his shapely feet, and his velvet breeches were secured at the waist with a girdle of crimson silk, from which protruded the butts of a pair of gold-mounted revolvers.

In his left hand the sport carried a flexible rattan cane, the head of which was formed of a virgin nugget as large as a doorknob, and it was an impatient tapping on the floor with this cane that had attracted the attention of Zetta Zebender.

"I beg your pardon for this intrusion,"

the sport exclaimed, removing his cap and inclining himself in a dignified manner, as the girl abruptly confronted him. "But as I am in urgent haste, and no one answered my knocking at the door, I ventured to enter."

"Is this Solomon Zebender's home?"

"It is—or was," Zetta answered, with a swift, sidelong glance at that waxen face on the bed. "You are here, sir, at a most inopportune time. My father is dying!"

The sport started. His eyes followed the woman's glance, and he impetuously moved forward.

"Dying, you say? I—"

A quick gesture from the girl checked the words. Then the doctor's wasted hand was laid against his shoulder in mild restraint.

"Wait!" he exclaimed, his bloodshot eyes flashing a keen look at that handsome face. "Who airt you, thet you intrude thus? Hasn't Miss Zebender told you thet ther man is dying—thet et is no time fer sech es you?"

"Ya-as, an' isn't ther gal's word enough?" growled Honeyfang, suddenly awakening from his open-mouthed contemplation of the stranger and lurching between him and the bed. "You git out!"

"Slowly, my friends!" retorted the sport, in quiet contempt, yet with a vivid gleam in his magnetic black eyes that boded ill to the ruffian. "I am not here unbidden, but at the urgent request of Solomon Zebender himself."

"Yer don't say!" Honeyfang sneered, while his protruding gray eyes flashed a look of cunning intelligence at the doctor. "An' who be you?"

"Yes, tell me who you are?" supplemented Zetta, with a curious contraction of her dark brows, while the little color remaining in her dusky face receded, leaving it a cold, gray hue. "Heaven knows I need a tried and true friend now! Am I to understand that you are—that my father has sent for you?"

"Precisely, Miss Zebender," the sport assured. "He suspected that he was soon to be made the victim of foul play, and to ease his conscience of a certain evil transaction in the past he sent for me."

"My name is Samuel Shelby, but I am called Shasta Sam, the Sparkler, and I have come a long distance at your father's request."

"But let the man speak for himself, for here is his letter," and from the pocket of his coat the sport drew an envelope, which he handed to Zetta.

It was postmarked "Blue Jacket, Idaho, March 5, 188—," in scrawling, almost illegible characters, and with renewed hope apparent in every movement the woman drew the folded sheet from within and opened it.

That which she saw was proof positive of the truth of the sport's assertions, for in a peculiarly heavy, sloping chirography, which she instantly recognized as her father's, was the following:

"BLUE JACKET, March 5, 188—.

"Samuel Shelby:

"Your trail crossed mine five years ago, and you were baffled."

"Come to me now, and I will tell you all."

"My life is nearly done; my conscience hurts me, and I would make amends for the past."

"Come to me at once, for my enemies are at work, and something tells me the end is near. Solomon Zebender."

Zetta Zebender shrank back and pressed her hands to her eyes, as if to shut out some horrid scene, and the letter fluttered unheeded to the floor.

But it did not escape the curiously eager gaze of Giles Honeyfang. With a swift forward, bending movement of his ponderous body, he stooped and clutched it in his grimy hand.

"Hold on!" the sport ejaculated. "That is private property, my man, and not for you."

"Ain't I a member o' ther fam'bly?" the ruffian retorted, a sneer crossing his

evil face. "Ain't I Solomon Zebender's closest an' best friend? Go 'way, yer card-sharp, or I'll kick yer out!"

Shasta Sam's eyes glittered wrathfully. Then, with a swift, cat-like spring, he was upon the ruffian, one hand grasping his hairy throat and shutting off the power of utterance, the other the wrist of the hand holding the letter, and wrenching it till the bones fairly cracked.

Throughout the latter part of this strange scene, Dr. Samuels had stood a silent, listless spectator, his blood-shot brown eyes looking stolidly, even hopelessly, from one to the other of the three actors; but now his interest seemed suddenly reawakened, and he crossed the cabin floor with quick, nervous strides and threw open the door.

"Throw him out, sir!" he exclaimed, turning and addressing the sport with almost pitiful eagerness. "He's worried the patient all day, an' we jest c'u'dn't git rid o' him."

"Yes, yes! Throw him out!" added Zetta Zebender, who had dropped her hands from her eyes at the slight noise accompanying Shasta Sam's movements, and she darted forward and secured the letter.

Even the terrible eyes upon the bed, now growing dim and lustreless with the film of death, seemed to close and open approvingly.

Then, with a superb exhibition of suppleness and strength, Shasta Sam deftly shifted his hold upon Giles Honeyfang, to grasp him around the middle and swing him clear of the floor.

A yell of mingled rage and terror burst from the ruffian's swollen throat, to be quickly followed by a series of vicious threats; but, undaunted, the Sparkler strode steadily across the room, and the next minute Honeyfang struck the snow-covered earth so heavily that for the moment the breath was jarred from his body.

Hardly waiting to bestow a second glance upon the prostrate ruffian, Shasta Sam closed the door and turned to Zetta Zebender.

The girl had recovered her composure, and now greeted the sport with a wan smile.

"I trust you will overlook your rude reception," she exclaimed, her deep, dark eyes frankly meeting the gaze of the sport. "I have been well-nigh distracted all day, and hardly knew what I was doing."

"Pray don't mention it, Miss Zebender," Shasta Sam returned, with a slight bow. "Circumstances, not you, have been at fault, I am sure."

"Now, may I see your father, at once?"

"Certainly, sir. He has been awaiting your coming most anxiously."

At that juncture, Dr. Samuels, moving away from the side of the couch, turned to the sport.

"My frien', I'm sorry, but you're too late," he announced, in a husky whisper. "Ther man is dead!"

True enough. A single startled glance showed that the last spark of life in Solomon Zebender had fled!

CHAPTER VI.

THE SPARKLER AND THE MAJOR.

Shasta Sam did not long delay his departure from the Zebender home.

"He was a strange man, and the daughter is a strange girl," he muttered, pausing to look back through the sifting snow at that humble cabin nestling upon the mountain-side. "Possessed of a cool million, and living and dying in a hovel like that!"

"Was it due to fear that his crime would find him out, or only to greed?"

"Well, it is ended now. He is dead, and again am I foiled in the case of my life!"

"But—peace to his ashes!—peace to his ashes!"

The Sparkler resumed his way down the mountain, heading toward the twinkling lights of Blue Jacket, now showing redly in the gathering gloom.

A quarter of a mile below the cabin he came upon the wagon trail leading into camp, and a few minutes later entered the hotel at which he had secured quarters.

"The Idaho House" the hostelry was called, as announced by the rudely lettered sign extending across its front, and it was the most pretentious building in Blue Jacket.

It was two stories in height. The outer walls were of rough pine slabs, set upright and nailed to heavy cross timbers, and at irregular intervals were small windows, each formed of a single sash and provided with a heavy wooden shutter.

The first floor was divided into three compartments—saloon, dining room, and kitchen—by means of thin board partitions. The second floor was split in halves by a long, dark passageway running almost the length of the building, and these halves, in turn, were cut up into small sleeping apartments, some thirty in number.

The saloon occupied fully two-thirds of the first floor. A small corner at the front end of the bar was made to do duty as the hotel office, and the remainder of the space was given over to tables for drinking and gambling.

Here it was, as the reader knows, that most of the men of Blue Jacket were wont to congregate when the day's work was done, and "The Sports' Resort," as the Red Belt Sport had rechristened the saloon and gambling hall, did a flourishing business.

At the moment Shasta Sam entered, probably twenty men were in the place, nearly all miners, lounging about, drinking, chatting, and smoking, but a hush came upon them as the sport appeared.

The Sparkler had been scarcely three hours in the camp, having come in late in the afternoon on the stage from the north, but all there had heard of his arrival and that he had gone forthwith to see Solomon Zebender, and thus he and his errand were being freely discussed.

But now that the stranger was before them in person, the miners held their tongues, that they might the better use their eyes.

Pausing just inside the door, the Sparkler turned to the landlord, who stood behind the bar, with his finger upon a line in the open register, talking to Major Marker.

"Hallo! hallo!" the host smilingly exclaimed, closing and laying aside the book and unctuously rubbing his hands, as he leaned toward the sport. "Did you find your man?"

"Oh, yes; I had not the slightest difficulty in finding him, thanks to your directions," the Sparkler returned.

"An' a man would be safe—puffectly safe, in bettin' all his wealth thet you found him ready for business, too," the major remarked, in an insinuating way, while his round, oily face betrayed the deepest interest.

Shasta Sam smiled.

"Oh, no," he replied. "I found it impossible to do any business with him; the man is dead!"

Both men looked surprised.

"It is a strange case," the landlord observed, and the major echoed the words.

"Yes, there is something mysterious about the matter," assented Shasta.

"And now, landlord, there are some questions I would like to ask you in private. I am a stranger in Blue Jacket, here on business, and I wish to gain some information concerning the camp and certain other matters. Can you oblige me?"

"With pleasure, Mr. Shelby; but permit me to introduce Major Marker. He is a pioneer here, and an honorable man. I would suggest that you talk to him. He knows far more about men and matters in Blue Jacket than I do."

The Sparkler nodded, and grasped the hand of the seedy fellow in black.

"I'm proud to know ye!" the major declared, beamingly. "Ye look like a first-class sport, an' them's ther kind o' people I like ter meet."

"Call on me fer any p'int about ther camp an' et's people, an' I shall be most happy ter obleege ye."

Then the landlord drew aside, leaving the two men alone.

"How long has this man Zebender been a resident of Blue Jacket?" Shasta Sam abruptly inquired, in a guarded voice.

"About three years."

"What property has he here?"

"A heap; ther Good Luck Mine is mostly his, an' then he owns a number o' mighty good claims."

"And the man Honeyfang?"

"Come here with ole Sol. He's an ugly brute, an' he's a grip on ther miser."

"Did Zebender's daughter come with him, too?"

"No; she's bin at school, somewhar, an' on'y come last fall. Et war a case o' dove in a hawk's nest, though they do say es how she'd nigh convarted ther ole man."

"It is known, then, that she is really Zebender's daughter?"

"Oh, yas; an' she tarned ther ole man honest, too, fer he's made nary a cheat sence she came," Major Marker earnestly declared. "He's bin a heap sight diff'rent, I tell you."

Shasta Sam pondered a moment, then, abruptly changing the subject, asked:

"Are there many hunters living in the hills around Blue Jacket?"

A puzzled look came over the major's round red face, and he shook his head negatively.

"On'y one es I calls ter mind," he replied. "Thet's Old Antelope. He brings game ter camp once a week. His cabin is back in ther hills, some miles f'm hyar."

"His name is Abram Moselle?"

"Mebbe; can't say fer sure. Never heer'd et called."

"He lives alone?"

"No; his wife, Old Betty, lives with him, an' then they hes a gal—Wild Nell."

"Wild Nell, you say?" and the voice of the Sparkler betrayed intense interest.

The major nodded complacently.

"So I said," he affirmed. "An' ther name fits, too, fer she's shy es a deer. No galoot in Blue Jacket hes ever see'd her, 'cept at a distance. They do say Old Antelope an' his wife set great store by her—sent her off ter school, an' sech."

"She is ther daughter, then?"

"Cain't say, fer I don't know."

"Old Antelope is one of the men I came to Blue Jacket to see," the Sparkler observed. "Could you guide me to his cabin to-morrow?"

The veteran hesitated, then stammered:

"I c'u'd—yes, but—. Beg yer pardon! Ef ther deal's square—"

"Rest easy on that point," cut in Shasta; "you shall be assured; but we'll pass that point, for the present. Answer me one more question: Is there a Rafael Reno in Blue Jacket?"

"No, sir! I know every galoot in camp, an' thar's none hyar o' thet name."

That ended the conference.

Shasta thanked both the major and the landlord, paid for a month's board and lodging and called for the cigars for the crowd.

Then the word went through the room that Solomon Zebender was dead, and in a moment everybody was talking of the occurrence.

The miser had never been popular in Blue Jacket; but many recalled little acts of kindness and some few deeds of cunningly-hidden charity, while others wondered what Zetta, the dark-eyed daughter, would do.

In the midst of the discussion, the outer door was flung open, and Giles Honeyfang strode into the room.

That the desperado had been drinking, all knew at a glance, for his brutal face was flushed and his pale gray eyes wore that peculiar, glassy look which liquor brings to some men.

Half-blinded by that sudden transition from darkness to light, Honeyfang stopped a few paces from the door and

savagely rubbed his eyes, then dashed his hat aside, and with hands upon revolver butts, defiantly faced the crowd.

"Whar is he? Whar is Shasta Sam, I say?" he yelled. "Trot him out, pards, tell I eats him up, fer I'm a hungry wolf with nary a bone ter gnaw!"

Then he caught sight of the Sparkler's smiling face, and with a maddened roar sprang forward, brandishing his huge fists.

Eluding that savage rush, Shasta drove his clenched hand into the ruffian's face, knocking him down!

CHAPTER VII.

TWICE WARNED.

Honeyfang struck the floor with a resounding crash, but immediately jumped to his feet, revolvers in hand.

His lips were bleeding freely, his eyes were ablaze with rage, and he presented a picture of demoniac fury.

"Cuss ye!" he snarled, viciously; and that he meant to do harm, none could doubt, and there was a sudden scurrying, right and left, among the spectators.

The Sparkler was the coolest man in the room. Instead of retreating or attempting to draw a weapon, he darted forward with the lightness of a feather-weight and landed a stiff right-hand punch on the ruffian's nose.

Back went the bristling head of Honeyfang, with a jerk, and then he fell backward at full length.

This time he did not rise.

The blow, or the fall, or the two combined, had produced unconsciousness, and so far as he was concerned the trouble was over, for the time, at least.

Then some of his friends volunteered to get him home and look after him, and when they had carried him out quiet was restored.

"By Jove! thet war es purty a right-hander es I ever see!" the major declared, in his oily way, as he warmly grasped the hand of the sport. "Shasta Sam, you do Blue Jacket proud!"

"In my younger days I was one o' ther coves w'ot loves a mill; an' et's a puffetly safe bet, sir, thet I know jest what I'm talkin' about when I say a neater blow was never struck!"

"An' et went home with proper force, too, fer Honeyfang dropped like he was shot, an' I reckon when he comes to he'll wonder how et happened," and the veteran chuckled complacently.

"But, sport, ye must keep a bright eye out fer a double-bankin' game, fer thet cuss is revengeful, an' es he runs with a bad gang, he'll be mighty apt ter come after ye hot."

"Oh, I'll be on my guard," the Sparkler assured, and then he passed into the dining room to eat his supper.

It chanced that the room was almost deserted. But two miners were at table, and a moment later both these men rose and went into the barroom, and Shasta Sam found himself alone.

Then a neat-looking girl appeared from the kitchen to receive his order, and the Sparkler could not help noticing that she was greatly agitated.

Her comely face was pale, her blue eyes wore a terrified look, and she pulled nervously at her big white apron.

Glancing hastily around the room, she quickly approached Shasta Sam.

"Oh, sir! You are in danger—terrible danger!" she exclaimed, her clear vibrant voice sinking almost to a whisper. "Be careful, or they will kill you!"

"Who, little girl?" the Sparkler asked, kindly, and with a reassuring smile.

The girl shuddered.

"That frightful man, Giles Honeyfang, and his crowd," she replied. "I heard them, just now, back of the kitchen, and they were certainly plotting to do you harm before the night is over."

"There were three of them, and they spoke of others who would help, so that the odds will be fearfully against you when they appear, and you must be very careful or you will come to grief."

"Mother and I were badly frightened

and first thought to tell father, and I was about to do so when you came in, and we decided to tell you."

The Sparkler had listened most attentively to the girl, and his handsome face grew stern.

"I thank you, little girl, and your good mother, for the kindly interest you have shown, and for the warning," he returned, courteously. "'Forewarned is indeed forearmed,' and if the ruffians attack me I shall do my best to protect myself."

"I came into Blue Jacket an utter stranger, bent on business only, and seeking trouble with no man; yet, circumstances forced me to incur the enmity of this Honeyfang, before I had been in the camp an hour, and now it seems the quarrel must be continued to the bitter end."

Then the Sparkler again thanked the girl, pressed a gold piece into her hand, and requested that his supper be brought to him at once.

The meal was a plain but substantial one, and in a few minutes Shasta Sam finished it, whereupon he rose and proceeded direct to his room on the second floor.

Here his baggage, a stout trunk and a grip, had been brought when the stage came in, and from their contents the Sparkler prepared himself for the evening's campaign.

Divesting himself of his costly apparel, he donned a cunningly woven shirt of steel mail, then a white flannel shirt, and a full suit of tanned and dyed buckskin, high-topped boots, and a slouched black hat.

A stout leather belt took the place of the silken girdle about his trim waist, and then he closed and locked the trunk, examined his weapons, and prepared to descend.

His diamonds, with the single exception of the massive stone in his tie, had disappeared, and the change in his garb had transformed him into the semblance of a wealthy cattleman or rancher out for "a lark."

Descending to the barroom, he purchased and lighted a cigar, then, while talking to the landlord, carelessly scanned the steadily growing throng.

Several games had opened during his absence, and Landlord Swift ventured the prediction that it would be the busiest Saturday night the Sport's Resort had known in many months.

Then Major Marker appeared and joined in the conversation, and after a few minutes drew the Sparkler aside.

"Thar's goin' ter be trouble hyar to-night," volunteered the veteran, in a mysterious whisper. "Of course, et's none o' my funeral, Shasta Sam, but I've kinder taken a fancy ter you, an' I've figured et out thet I'd not be doin' jest right if I didn't putt you up ter ther time o' day."

"That ther berdered Honeyfang is layin' fer you with his gang, an' ef you don't look sharp he's goin' ter give you ther meanest kind of a cold deal."

"Now, I'm dead sot ag'in' any gum-games o' thet kind, an' I kalkilated thet when ther bresh came I'd chip in myself, jest fer luck."

"In my younger days I was some'at of a fightin' man, an' no jolly young blade liked a rip-roarin' ruction better than your humble sarvent."

"You understand, of course, thet ef et war man to man, or even two ter one, I'd not mix in; but et's not thet—et's a hull gang ag'in' one, an' no' man with ther right kind o' blood in him kin stand an' see a deal o' thet kind."

"No, a thing o' that kind is never tolerated by a man of the right stripe," the Sparkler returned.

"I thank you, major, not only for the warning, but for your timely offer of assistance as well. An intimation that I might expect trouble had reached me, but it does not lessen the value of what you have told me."

"You'd heer'd, then—"

"Oh, yes; it came to me before I had eaten my supper, but not in detail."

"Do you know what plan these fellows intend to follow?"

The veteran shook his head.

"Only that they intend fer to go fer you," he replied, ruefully. "But from what I know of ther gang, I reckon they'll try ter make et appear a case of accident."

"Ye see, Red Belt, ther boss o' ther place, isn't come in yet, an' my idee is thar'll be a row kicked up, an' you'll catch a stray bullet or two afore he tarns up."

Shasta Sam laughed.

"That is quite likely correct," he declared. "It is an old game, and cunning enough to win nine times out of ten where the victim is taken unawares."

"But in this case I think we can even the odds. We know the attack is coming, and we know the leader of the gang. Taking these two points, we should be able to turn the trick against them."

"Oh, yes!" the veteran exclaimed. "Ef we're on our guard, we'd orter make 'em almighty sick o' ther game."

"But, sport, et strikes me thet ef I war in your place I'd make et a dead-sure p'int ter drill Honeyfang fer keeps. He's a tough and a bully, an' et's a puffectly safe bet Blue Jacket will be glad ter attend his funeral."

But to this proposition the Sparkler gave a decided negative.

"I'll have to admit there's mighty good common sense in your suggestion, major," he averred. "But in this affair I shall hardly be able to proceed in a common-sense way, as these things go."

"The truth is, the life of this miserable scoundrel, Giles Honeyfang, is most valuable to me. He is in possession, I suspect, of a secret I would give a good many thousand dollars to know."

"If he dies, very likely the secret will die with him. Possession of this secret is essential to my peace of mind and happiness, and there the thing is in a nutshell."

"Don't kill the fellow unless it becomes absolutely necessary, for I must yet find ways and means to wring the truth from him."

The veteran assented, and then, as the conversation was beginning to attract the attention of the curious, the Sparkler proposed taking a turn at the faro bank.

"You go at et, pardner, but excuse me," the major returned, with a doleful shake of his head. "Et's a puffectly safe bet no man livin' likes a good, healthy tussel with ther tiger better than yours truly. But ter tell ther gospel truth, I'm clean bu'sted—sent every dollar I had ter my lawyers a few days ago, an' et'll be at least a week before my remittances arrive. So thar you are, an' I reckon you'll have to count me out o' ther game."

As the reader knows, Shasta Sam had formed a pretty accurate estimate of the veteran beat earlier in the evening, but the thought occurred to him that the major might prove valuable as an ally, and he determined to enlist him.

"Allow me to advance you a hundred," he suggested, and then, before the astonished veteran could recover his breath, he drew forth a roll and slipped off a couple of bills, which he promptly pressed into the hand lifted in mock protest.

A grin expressive of keen delight overspread the major's oily face.

"Shasta Sam, you're a true-blue sport, an' a gen'leman ter boot!" he gurgled, deftly slipping the bills out of sight. "You do me proud! Take somethin' with me!"

The Sparkler demurred, but the veteran insisted, and they paid their respects to the bar, whereupon Peter Swift had the doubtful satisfaction of chalk-ing up another round on the long account standing against the name of Major Marker.

Then the two crossed to the faro layout at the opposite side of the room.

Although neither suspected it, they were upon the eve of a peculiar run of luck.

CHATER VIII. THE ATTACK.

At the moment Shasta Sam and the major seated themselves at the faro table the Red Belt Sport entered the room.

He carried a handsome repeating rifle, a couple of splendid dogs were at his heels, and it was evident that he was just in from a ramble in the hills.

Pausing only long enough to take a glass of seltzer and exchange a few words with the landlord, the gambler hastened to his room to prepare for supper.

Meanwhile, Shasta Sam had purchased a couple of hundred dollars' worth of checks and begun to play, while the major, to the intense surprise of the faro dealer, produced and invested a crisp fifty-dollar note.

For a deal or two the game ran on in a hum-drum way, with no material change in the fortunes of the players or the bank. The Sparkler lost a few dollars, while the major succeeded in doubling his stake.

Then the Red Belt Sport appeared from the dining room, nodded pleasantly to his patrons, and at once relieved the dealer, and the play began in earnest.

In two bets the Sparkler lost the remainder of his original stake, but immediately went down into his pocket for five hundred dollars, which he placed in a lump on the last cards in the box, calling the turn, and won.

As the odds on this play were four to one, the sport was eighteen hundred dollars ahead of the game, and he settled himself in his chair for a battle royal.

With the beginning of the new deal, his luck set in in earnest, and when the last turn was made he was in possession of something like five thousand dollars of the bank's money, while the major, his oily face beaming with joy, reckoned his gains at something more than half that amount.

That the Red Belt Sport was annoyed all could see, though his face was calm and impassive. Shifting box and pack, he shuffled the fresh cards and slipped them into place, exposing the king of diamonds as the "soda" or top card.

Promptly Shasta Sam set five hundred dollars' worth of checks on the layout, behind the queen, thus playing king, queen, and knave to win.

Here it was that the most remarkable feature of his wonderful luck manifested itself, for on each of eleven successive turns one of the three cards showed, winning for the Sparkler, and eleven times he reached out and took down five hundred dollars—five thousand and five hundred dollars in all.

Nor was the major's luck much less phenomenal, for he, too, was a steady winner, though to a smaller amount.

But the bank could not further withstand such a run of ill-luck; it was loser to the extent of nearly twenty thousand dollars, and Red Belt nonchalantly turned the silver dealing box upon its side and declared the game closed.

"I'm hard hit, gentlemen, and it's no use to go beyond what I can settle to-night," he announced. "But the game will be open to-morrow, as usual, and as strong as ever, and I trust that I shall have the pleasure of seeing you again."

Then he took up the checks, carefully stacked them in the rack, and handed out the money, whereupon Shasta Sam and his companion arose from the table and walked over to the bar.

While playing, both men had kept a watchful eye upon the crowd gathered about the table, and were assured that Honeyfang and his gang had not yet appeared.

"Talk about luck!" chuckled the major, nudging the sport with his elbow. "Ef we ain't hed a clean run of it, I don't know!"

"An hour ago I was cleaned out—now I've got over seven thousand good hard dollars, an' Richard is himself ag'in!"

"We were remarkably fortunate," the Sparkler rejoined. "I have seldom seen or heard of so singular a run of luck, and

I confess that I am superstitious enough to regard it as an omen of good in the coming struggle."

"And, by the way, there is Honeyfang now!"

True enough; the giant desperado had just entered the door of the saloon, closely followed by a number of rough-looking fellows, all armed to the teeth.

Shasta Sam and the major had reached the bar, but both faced resolutely about, weapons in hand, to confront Giles Honeyfang and his pards.

"Stiddy, critter!" the giant gritted, as his weapons swung to a level, his badly-bruised face glowing with rage. "I done reckon thar'll be no wrastlin' nor boxin' in this hewr whirly-gust, fer—"

"Ready, pards! Let her go!"

Sharply, savagely came that abrupt command from the discolored lips of Honeyfang, to be instantly followed by a furious volley of pistol shots from the roughs at his back, and amid the crashing of glass the flame in every lamp in the place flickered and went out!

Intuitively, Shasta Sam sprang nimbly aside, revolvers up and ready—only to sink inertly to the floor under a terrific blow upon the head!

No blind, wild attack, inspired by hate and a thirst for revenge was that, but a cunningly arranged trap to deprive the Sparkler of liberty, if not life!

Inert, senseless, he was raised to his feet, and, under cover of the intense darkness, half-carried, half-dragged to the open door, where other hands were waiting to receive him.

The hoarse voice of Giles Honeyfang urging his men on, the sonorous defiance of Major Marker, the trampling and shuffling of many feet—the various sounds incident to that sudden and furious attack, all conspired to cover that bold abduction.

"Separate, pards, an' guard doors and windows!" shouted Honeyfang, after a moment. "He's a cunning fox, an' we'll take ter the bresh fu'st off!"

But, swift as were the ruffians to obey that sharp command, they were discounted by Landlord Swift and the Red Belt Sport. A lamp flared up on each side of the room, and boniface and gambler leaped upon tables, each with a repeating shot-gun in hand.

"Steady! you cattle!" warned the Red Belt Sport, in tones of cold contempt, as the muzzle of his gun dropped to a level. "Move hand or foot without the word, and neither pepper nor salt will save your cowardly carcasses!"

"Remember—there's six good loads—each load good for a round dozen!"

To a man, the roughs shrank back and halted in confusion. All knew that the gambler spoke the truth—that the "ii-ot" guns in the hands of himself and Peter Swift were heavily charged with buckshot, and warranted to do terrible execution at that close and deadly range!

With lowering face, Giles Honeyfang thrust his weapons back into his belt, and, nodding curtly, said:

"We passes, Pard Red Belt, an' will wait fer a better time ter ketch our game."

"This hyar yearth ain't big enough fer me an' Shasta Sam both ter perambulate around on et, an' I hyarby gives notice thet one or t'other hes got ter die!"

And with that warlike declaration the burly ruffian glared around the room in quest of his foe.

The Sparkler was nowhere visible.

"Flunked! Levanted, by ther great horned toad!" exclaimed Honeyfang, with a well-simulated start of surprise. "Tail tucked, an' headin' fer ther bresh—"

"You're a-playin' ther truth with a copper, I'm bettin'!" interrupted Major Marker, indignantly. "Shasta Sam never tured heel ter you nor these cattle with you!"

A furious retort was upon the lips of Honeyfang, but ere he could give it utterance a lithe form bounded through the open doorway and confronted him, while over a brace of leveled revolvers came the stern words:

"Dastard! What have you done with Old Antelope?"

"Speak quickly, for I am here to know the truth—to avenge the wrong!"

CHAPTER IX. WILD NELL'S STORY.

The one uttering that stern demand was a young girl of striking beauty of face and form.

She was dressed in short skirts of tanned buckskin, beaded and quilled after the Indian manner, with a long jacket or coat of the same material, snug-fitting and belted at the waist with a broad sash of some black stuff. Her feet were encased in high-topped patent-leather boots, while upon her proudly-poised head was a gray sombrero, looped up at the side with a miniature gold bowie.

Her eyes were black; her hair was dark brown, long, and wavy, and confined at the back of her neck with a circlet of ribbon. The face was delicately molded, but browned by exposure, with dainty red lips and gleaming white teeth.

Hanging at her back was a handsome repeating rifle; a long hunting knife was in her girdle, and beside it were holsters for the revolvers in her hands.

A murmur of surprise, quickly changing to admiration, went up from the crowd, as the girl confronted Giles Honeyfang with that stern and threatening command:

"Speak quickly, for I am here to know the truth—to avenge the wrong!"

Startled, the ruffian shrank back, then quickly rallied his wits, and with a cunning leer upon his face replied:

"Old Antelope, ye ask? Wal, now, I cain't say, Wild Nell. He war hyar in camp yistiddy, with game ter sell, I heurs, tho' I didn't see him.

"But why ask me? I don't keep tab—"

"Stop! Do you think to deceive me? Tell me the truth, for it is the truth I am determined to have!" and Wild Nell's black eyes flashed angrily.

"It is true Old Antelope came to Blue Jacket yesterday, with game to sell. In the afternoon he left the camp, and you followed him."

"I followed him!" repeated Giles Honeyfang, in open-eyed astonishment. "Deed an' double, Wild Nell, ye aire mistaken thar!"

"I am not mistaken!" the girl declared, earnestly. "As I said, he left the camp for home, and you followed him."

The ruffian's face grew dark and lowering.

"Wild Nell, I tell ye ye aire mistaken," he iterated, vehemently. "I tells ye I did not foller Old Antelope."

"And I say that you did, Giles Honeyfang!"

"Prove et!"

"It is simply my word against yours," averred Wild Nell, bitterly. "I was up in the mountains, but with my glass I saw Old Antelope coming up the trail. Ten minutes later you came along, revolver in hand, dogging his steps."

An ominous murmur rose from the crowd.

"Men of Blue Jacket, I appeal to you for a fair hearing—that is all," Nell continued, with a single sweeping glance at the faces of the surrounding throng. "It is my belief that Giles Honeyfang is guilty of the murder of Old Antelope, but not until it is clearly proved must there be violence done."

"It shall be as you say, lady," Red Belt declared, with a significant nod to Landlord Swift. "State your case, and no man shall lift a hand until Honeyfang is proved guilty."

Wild Nell nodded approvingly.

"That suits," she declared, tersely. "And now, to resume:

"From my position on the mountain is was simply impossible for me to warn Old Antelope of his danger, and, as the next best thing to do, I descended to the trail as rapidly as possible.

"Of course, neither man was in sight when I gained the trail; but I hurried onward, expecting each minute to hear a pistol shot.

"No report came, and after nearly an hour of rapid walking I concluded that Old Antelope had eluded his pursuer.

"Then, within a few hundred yards of our cabin, I came upon a spot betraying signs of a desperate struggle. At that hour no snow had fallen, but the stony trail was stained with blood.

"No sign of a living presence was there, and, in alarm, I hastened on to the cabin, hoping to find that Old Antelope had succeeded in reaching home.

"But he was not there, nor had Old Betty, his wife, heard the sounds of that desperate conflict so near at hand, and we vainly searched the vicinity until nightfall for some trace of him, living or dead.

"Compelled to give over the search by the coming of darkness, Old Betty and myself returned to the cabin and barricaded the doors, for we felt that we, too, were in danger of attack.

"Nor was our surmise wrong. During the night the cabin was attacked by a number of men, who attempted to force an entrance, but were driven off. At day-break we left the cabin by a secret way, and came over the mountains to Blue Jacket.

"That, men of Blue Jacket, is the story in brief, and, as truly as I stand here, Giles Honeyfang was the man I saw on the trail of Old Antelope."

Calmly, but in tones of bitter determination had Wild Nell spoken, and when she ceased, that ominous murmur again rose from the rough men crowded around her.

"Silence—all!" warned the Red Belt Sport, in a cold, clear voice from his position upon the table; and then, as the murmur subsided: "The lady has spoken and her words certainly have the ring of truth.

"Giles Honeyfang, what have you to say?"

In open-mouthed surprise, if not dismay, the accused ruffian had listened to that terse recital, so damaging to himself, from the lips of Wild Nell; but at that abrupt question his wide jaws shut sharply, and he boldly confronted the gambler.

"Jest this: Wild Nell is mistaken!" he declared, with a gesture half mockery, half defiance. "I hates ter say et, but ther lady's clean off ther trail o' truth, es I kin prove ter all!"

"Go ask Zetta Zebender whar I was all day yistiddy—all night last night!"

"That's fair enough," Peter Swift interposed. "If any living person has knowledge of your movements during that time, Miss Zebender must be the one.

"But I frankly confess that I believe Wild Nell has made no mistake—that you have done away with Old Antelope. Therefore, to the calaboose you must go until the matter is decided."

"Yes—yes! that's the ticket!" Red Belt coincided, and his cry was echoed by others.

Then, to the surprise of all, Honeyfang quietly returned his revolvers to the holsters in his belt, saying:

"So be it. Bring on yer marshal.

"I am innocent, an' Zetta Zebender will prove et!"

Long Dave Sly, the marshal, at once strode forward, placed the ruffian under arrest and led him away.

"Now, to appoint a committee to wait upon Miss Zebender," Red Belt continued, when the retreating steps of the marshal and his prisoner could no longer be heard. "It is hardly the thing to intrude upon the lady at this time, but in a case of this kind we can't stand upon ceremony."

"That is true," some one assented, and then a committee of three, with the Red Belt Sport as spokesman, was quickly appointed and dispatched upon the errand in hand.

The return of the three was eagerly awaited.

Within an hour, they filed into the Sports' Resort, and Red Belt again mounted the table.

Instantly a hush came over the crowd,

while Wild Nell, who had retired to the dining room, was hastily summoned by Landlord Peter Swift.

Then the Red Belt Sport tersely announced:

"The statements made by Giles Honeyfang have been borne out to the letter by Miss Zetta Zebender.

"During the day and the night, he was at no time absent from the cabin longer than half an hour, as was at once proved beyond question.

"It is simply a case of mistaken identity, and the committee recommends that Honeyfang be at once released from custody."

Wild Nell's face grew white with passion, and her dark eyes blazed with dire ire.

Slowly and without a word she turned and walked out of the place.

The morning came bright and clear, and with the first peep of the sun above the eastern horizon Blue Jacket awoke to a fresh sensation.

Dead in the winding street, with his bearded face upturned to the cold, blue sky, lay Old Antelope.

CHAPTER X.

ABNER ESTELL.

Taking advantage of the excitement created by the sudden appearance of Wild Nell and her startling charge against Giles Honeyfang, Major Marker had quietly slipped from the barroom into the dining room of the Idaho House.

The veteran was loath to believe that Shasta Sam had taken his departure under cover of darkness to escape the attack of Honeyfang and his allies.

"Et's a puffedly safe bet ther Sparkler didn't do no sech a thing," he muttered, his furtive little eyes sweeping the empty dining room, as he crossed the threshold. "He's clean game, thet sport is, with nary a streak o' yaller in his makeup, an' hyar goes ter nose out his trail. He's fallen in with ther critters, an' they've run him off ter ther hills fer clean, quiet pickin'."

Then the major passed through a side door into the street, and bent his head to listen.

"I knowed et!" he chuckled, after a moment, as a faint, but regular jar came to his ears. "A passel o' horses makin' a clean run out ther north trail, an' et's a thousand-ter-one shot they've got ther Sparkler."

Confident, now, that he had solved the mystery of Shasta Sam's abrupt disappearance, the veteran hurried to the corral in the rear of the hotel, where he procured and accoutered a horse, then mounted and set forward in swift pursuit.

He had taken the precaution to muffle the hoofs of his steed, while in the corral, and, as the night was extremely dark, he felt little fear of detection.

Along the winding street of the camp he sped, then out upon that rough and dangerous trail at break-neck speed, determined to shorten the gap between himself and the Sparkler's captors ere they could slip undetected into some defile or canyon to complete their desperate errand.

"Ef I kin on'y 'spot' ther layout, I reckon ther trick is most es good es turned," the veteran mused, straining his ears to catch some sound by which to locate the fleeing roughs. "Et's a mighty queer play, anyhow, an—"

Breaking off abruptly, Major Marker drew rein and dismounted, to lay his ear close to the snow-covered earth.

A sound had reached him, and a moment's listening convinced him it came from those in advance.

"Closin' up, all right," he muttered grimly, as he again clambered into the saddle and struck spurs to his horse. "Now, go! ye rascal!"

Obedient to that low-voiced command, the horse sprang forward like a flash, and in a few minutes the hoof-strokes of those in advance grew clear and distinct.

Chuckling, now that the game seemed in such easy reach, the veteran slackened

speed and loosened the weapons in his holsters. Then, with startling suddenness, a pair of dark forms leaped out from a hidden alcove in the rocks bordering the trail, and barred the way.

"Hands up, pilgrim!" sharply ordered the foremost, one hand closing firmly upon the nostrils of the major's horse and driving the animal back upon its haunches, the other swinging a cocked revolver to a level. "Et's a bad hour o' ther night ter travel this trail. Ye must give an account o' yerself!"

"An' pay a bit o' toll fer our trouble," supplemented the second, flourishing his revolvers in a threatening manner. "Ding-bats, paper or dust—et's all one, long as thar's plenty of et!"

Major Marker was a quick-witted man, and courageous; but the attack was unexpected, and he was caught completely off his guard.

Thanks to the precaution he had just taken, however, his hands were upon the butts of his revolvers.

"Wal, pards, et's a puffedly safe bet ye caught me nappin'," he remarked, with that air of easy assurance peculiar to him. "But et kinder strikes me ye've collared ther wrong pilgrim."

"Ther wrong pilgrim? Oh, no, major! You aire jest ther man we were hopin' ter see!" assured the nearer of the outlaws.

"So—ho!"

"Yas, major; et struck us ye'd be putty rich pickin', eh, Pete?"

"You has called et, Pard Dirk."

The veteran sighed, and slowly shook his head.

"Et's too bad, boys, but I'm busted," he declared. "My suits hev not bin decided yet, an' I tell you court costs an' lawyers' fees hev kept me cleaned right down ter hard pan. Mebbe ye'll strike me in better trim, next time."

"Ye're good enough right now, major," the outlaw Dirk assured. "Thar's thet leetle matter of a few thousand ye won from Red Belt ter-night—"

"Oh, bless ye, man dear!" blandly interrupted the veteran. "I put thet in ther Express office ter ship East ter my lawyers jest afore I left Blue Jacket. Ef I'd on'y knowed—"

A howl of rage and incredulity broke in upon that smooth and oily voice, and both outlaws stepped nearer their victim.

"Dismount, an' we'll search ye, ye fat fraud!" uttered Dirk, savagely.

"Thet we will," echoed the outlaw Pete, and then both men brandished their weapons in an extremely ugly way.

"I'm a-comin'!—I'm a-comin'!" Major Marker hastily protested, his voice quivering with cunningly-simulated fright, and then he suddenly dropped behind his horse.

But, at the instant his feet touched the ground, the weapon in each hand exploded twice, and with sharp cries of pain both outlaws toppled over in the trail.

With agility wonderful for one of his years and corpulent build, the veteran leaped forward and disarmed his fallen foes.

"Now, stiddy, ye bloody pirts!" he warned, his voice low and menacing. "Ye're both due fer a stiff'kit fer a first-class funeral, an' I bets a weenty-bit o' kickin' will bring what's owin'!—fer a fac'!"

A groan was the only response, and the veteran hastily knelt and examined his victims.

The outlaw Dirk was dead, one of the heavy balls from the major's weapon having passed directly through his heart. Pete was wounded, though just how badly it was impossible, in that dense darkness, to tell.

But of one thing Major Marker felt assured: both men were strangers in Blue Jacket.

"None o' ther camp riff-raff, but outside talent," he muttered.

Then the wounded man spoke, his voice sounding strangely weak and hollow.

"Yes, yes! You are right, Major Marker," he exclaimed, abruptly dropping the border dialect.

"The man Dirk and myself are both strangers in Blue Jacket; indeed, neither of us has been in the West very long."

"We have both been down on our luck, and it was while casting about for some way in which to better our fortune that we were drawn into this job."

"I feel that I am dying, and I wish to make a clean breast of it, you see."

"Which same is nacheral, pardner, an' puffedly proper, too," the veteran assured, in his oily way. "Jest uncork yer vials o' penitence."

"My name is Estell—Abner Estell," pursued the wounded man, scarcely heeding the whimsical though kindly utterance of the major. "My father's name is Ichabad Estell, and you will find his address among papers in my pocket. Write to him and tell him I am dead, but do not tell him how I died."

"Jest es you say, pardner," nodded the veteran. "An' this hyar leetle job—you were a-sayin'—"

"Yes, I'll tell all I know," Abner Estell declared, his voice growing a trifle stronger and betraying just a trace of vexation at that thinly-veiled hint. "Give me time."

"We were on our way to Blue Jacket a week or more ago, were Dirk and I, when we were stopped on the trail a few miles north of here by a masked man, who introduced himself as Dick Dread, chief of the Red Raiders."

"In our case he made a water haul, for Dick and I hadn't a dollar between us. When the outlaw found how desperately hard up we were he laughed, handed us a few dollars each, and suggested that we join his band."

"Blind fools that we were, we jumped at his proposition. Then we were led back into the hills to the rendezvous, where were half a dozen cutthroats, and made to swear to obey the rules governing the Red Raiders."

"Yesterday morning three of the men got orders to report at a point near Blue Jacket, ready for work. But one returned unhurt, and he brought in as a captive a long-haired old hunter."

"Then, shortly after noon to-day, four of us got a hurry order to report at Blue Jacket, and Dirk and myself were among the number sent."

"A mile this side of camp we were met by the chief. He explained that circumstances had compelled him to change his plans. He had intended to abduct a young lady and hold her for ransom; but the afternoon stage had brought in a tip-top sport whom he recognized as an old-time eremy, and he wanted him captured and carried to the stronghold, or, failing in that, killed."

"It was while waiting for a chance to work the trick that we noted the heavy winning made by yourself and Shasta Sam, Major Marker, and after the trouble between the sport and Honeyfang we had little difficulty in getting that ruffian to open the game for us."

"We felt that if we succeeded in running the sport off, you would follow, hot-foot, and thus we would stand a chance of bagging both rolls, and so Dirk and I were dropped behind to way-lay you."

"Uh-huh!" the veteran ejaculated. "An' a bad job et war, too!"

"Oh, yes! We failed—failed miserably!" Abner Estell assented. "But then, a man's hindsight is much better than his foresight, or very few ventures of the kind would be made in this world."

"Yas, thet is true," declared the major, peering up the trail.

"But this hyar old hunter ye speak about—who war he?"

"He is known as Old Antelope."

"An' ther young leddy?"

"Wild Nell."

CHAPTER XI. THE ESCAPE.

Major Marker gave a slight start of surprise as Abner Estell made that terse announcement, and then he vividly recalled the scene in the Sports' Resort immediately following the dramatic appearance of Wild Nell.

"Et's a puffedly safe bet ther gal had read ther trail right when she tackled Honeyfang," the veteran mused.

Then, aloud:

"Wild Nell, ye say? An' who in tarnation did Dick Dread expect ter pay ransom fer her?"

"I don't know," Abner Estell replied, weakly. "Somehow, the boys seemed to think the ransom was a bluff—that the chief had learned the girl was an heiress, and expected to force her to marry him. I thought so, too."

"Uh—huh! Wal, thet's a queer kind o' wooin', or I'm a sinner! But, then, females aire owdashus queer critters, an' mebbe Dick's idee warn't so far wrong."

"Oh, no! His idea was really a brilliant one, so far as we could determine," rejoined Estell. "You see, we talked the thing over among ourselves while waiting at Blue Jacket to-night, and we came to the conclusion that this sport we were to capture was probably none other than the chief."

"Shasta Sam, you mean?"

"Exactly."

Major Marker uttered a sniff of disgust.

"Crazy es a passell o' bedbugs!" he exclaimed.

"Well, wait—let me explain," expostulated Estell, querulously. "The facts were such that we could reach no other conclusion."

"For weeks past a man has been stationed at a point above here, to keep watch on the trail and report all who come and go. Yesterday the man was withdrawn without cause and Lieutenant Rackstraw, who stands very near the chief, took his place and gave orders that no one should leave the rendezvous during his absence."

"That order was disobeyed. Dirk stole away from camp to hunt, and it was through him that we gained our information."

"He went over toward the trail, but some miles north of where the lieutenant was stationed, and he saw the coach stopped by this sport, who got aboard. He had a fair look at the man, and he declares that it was the chief without his mask."

"But yer orders were ter bring Shasta Sam in dead or alive, man!"

"Well, he came as meekly as a lamb," Estell retorted, with a ghastly attempt at a chuckle. "The clip he got over the head was harder than intended, but he'll make no kick when he comes to."

"Then, too, the order still stands to capture the girl, and we figured that some dark night Lieutenant Rackstraw would arrange matters so that when we got up in the morning Old Antelope, the sport, and the girl would all be missing."

Major Marker shook his head emphatically.

"Et's too roundabout a way fer a man like Shasta Sam," he declared. "Now, ef ther sport wanted thet gal, et's dollars ter doughnuts he'd go about et in a decent way, even ef he war Dick Dread."

"I've had a deal o' experience with ther female critters in my time, an' I must remark thet Shasta Sam is just ther kind of a chap ter ketch a maiden's fancy."

"Oh, no, Pard Estell, you an' yer pards hev made ther biggest kind of a mistake. This Shasta Sam is a sport—one o' ther clean, straightforward kind, ready ter back his opinions with all thar is of him."

"He's jest simply thet an' nothin' more, I opine, an' I'm open ter gamble thet he's not Dick Dread nor any other o' ther Red Raiders."

A violent shiver ran through Abner Estell's form, and he beat the snowy ground with his clenched hand.

"I tell you, I have made no mistake," he asseverated, his rapidly failing voice rising savagely. "Shasta Sam is the chief of the Red Raiders, known as Dick Dread!"

"More than that, he is my cousin—the son of my father's brother, Ishmael Estell!"

"Ye mean—"

"His name is Daniel Estell! Tax him with that, then let him deny that he is Dick Dread if he can!"

Abner Estell ended with a sharp gasp, and then a peculiar, gurgling sound came from his throat.

Major Marker drew back.

"His hand is played," he muttered, as he slipped fresh cartridges into the empty chambers of his revolvers. "An' I reckon et's a good thing fer Shasta Sam thet Abner Estell died right thar!"

Pausing only long enough to drag the bodies of the fallen outlaws to the side of the trail, the veteran mounted and again set forward.

The delay caused by the attack had been sufficient to permit the Red Raiders with Shasta Sam in charge, to pass beyond hearing, and the major urged his horse into a rapid gallop to regain the advantage lost.

Leaving the pursuer thus, let us follow the adventures of Shasta Sam.

The reader will remember that at the moment the lights in the Sports' Resort were extinguished, the Sparkler received a vicious blow on the head, which rendered him unconscious, and that while in that condition he was secretly carried out of the place.

This blow had been dealt by the outlaw Dirk, who, with the assistance of Abner Estell, at once carried the sport to the open door, where the others of the party were in waiting.

The order to retreat was at once given, and the four men hurried up the rough dark street to a small clump of pines, where their horses were in readiness.

Then the Sparkler was securely bound astride a led animal, and the little cavalcade galloped out of Blue Jacket.

"This is a fine night's work, pards," the leader exclaimed, in an exulting tone, when they had won clear of the camp's confines. "We've not only obeyed the chief's orders to the very letter, but have succeeded in catching our man well loaded with money."

"Et's ther best pull ther Red Raiders hev yet made," another asserted, with equal jubilation.

"True es gospel, both o' ye," rejoined Dirk. "An' yet we might 'a' done better."

"How so?"

"By takin' in Major Marker, too."

The suggestion seemed to strike each of the outlaws most forcibly, for all quickly drew rein.

"Mebbe ther trick kin be worked—"

"Not by goin' back," tersely interrupted the leader. "We went ter Blue Jacket ter obey orders—no more, no less!"

"But ef ther ole galoot can scent our trail, he'll be after us ter help out his new pard, fer they do say he's dead game."

This suggestion called forth a spirited discussion, which resulted in an agreement to leave two of the party in ambush on the trail, and Abner Estell and Dirk were selected for the purpose.

In the meantime, the crisp night air had revived Shasta Sam, and he was an interested listener, for the words of the Red Raiders partially explained the desperate plight in which he found himself.

His feet were tied firmly beneath the horse, while his hands were lashed securely to the saddle horn.

"I guess I am booked for a trip to the stronghold of these fellows," he could not help thinking, after slyly testing his bonds. "I only hope the major will not attempt to follow them alone, for they are desperate."

Then the party again moved forward, and no further halt was made until the spot for the ambush was reached, when all paused for a moment while the leader gave his parting injunction to Dirk and Estell.

It was at this moment that the Sparkler made a discovery which thrilled him with hope.

Under his desperate tugging and straining the thongs holding his hands were giving way. The Red Raiders

were yet ignorant of the fact that he had regained consciousness, and he determined to leave them so as long as possible.

Then Dirk and Estell withdrew from the trail, leading their horses, while the others again pushed onward with the captive.

Nearly a mile had they proceeded, in almost unbroken silence, when from the rear came a burst of pistol shots.

"He showed fight—they were compelled to down him!" the leader exclaimed, sharply drawing rein.

"Yas, I reckon he's full o' holes, an' no mistake," the second outlaw averred, the darkness hiding a vicious smile on his ugly face.

Both listened intently, but no further sounds came from the scene of the tragedy, and after a moment they resumed their flight.

At this juncture Shasta Sam succeeded in freeing his hand, and he cautiously felt for his knife to sever the bonds holding his feet.

Both knife and revolvers were gone.

"Now, here's a pretty pass!" the Sparkler soliloquized. "I'm just as badly off as before. I've had my work for nothing!"

Such, indeed, seemed to be the case. Bound to the horse and without weapons, he was certainly at the mercy of his captors.

For a couple of miles the miscreants rode onward at a leisurely pace, then turned aside from the trail and drew rein at the mouth of a narrow fissure in the rocks.

"I suppose we might as well wait for the boys and see what kind of a haul they made off the major," the leader remarked.

"An' we'd better take a look at ther sport, fer he seems ter be hard hit," the other suggested, and, suiting action to words, he rode alongside the Sparkler.

Swift as thought Shasta Sam's right hand went out, plucking a revolver from the belt of the outlaw; then, as a yell of surprise burst from the fellow's lips, the heavy butt descended upon his head, sending him sprawling from the saddle. Alarmed at this startling turn of affairs, the outlaw leader jerked a weapon from his belt; but, before he could fire, a ball from the sport shattered his arm, and he wheeled his horse and darted back to the trail in full flight.

Chuckling grimly at the success of his ruse, Shasta Sam caught the bridle of the fallen outlaw's horse, turned, and rode back to the trail, bent on retracing his way to Blue Jacket as quickly as possible.

A half mile back he was met by the major and a man afoot, whom the veteran introduced as Old Antelope.

Early in the night the old hunter had escaped from his captors, and had been on his way to camp when met by Major Marker.

Explanations followed. Then Old Antelope mounted the led horse, and the three started for Blue Jacket at a rapid pace.

Arrived at the mining camp, Major Marker took charge of the horses, while Shasta Sam and Old Antelope laid their course toward the hotel.

CHAPTER XII.

ACCUSED.

The clouds had vanished, the night had given place to day, and the snow was melting into tiny rivulets under the rays of the sun, when Shasta Sam was suddenly roused from a refreshing sleep by a thunderous knocking at his chamber door.

"Hallo! hallo!" he exclaimed, sitting upright on his narrow bed and staring blankly at his surroundings. "What's wanted?"

"Wake up, Shasta Sam! Wake up, an' let us in!" came the mellow voice of Major Marker, from the corridor beyond the door, in accents of suppressed excitement. "Thar's a heap o' trouble in this hyar camp, an' we must see ye."

Thoroughly awakened by that sum-

mons, the Sparkler sprang from the bed to the floor, hastily dressed himself, and opened the door.

Major Marker and the landlord at once entered the room, and the former carefully closed the door and locked it.

That both men were laboring under deep and powerful excitement, the Sparkler discerned at a glance.

The major's round, red face wore a look of gravity, bordering closely upon the ridiculous, while Landlord Swift was a trifle pale and extremely nervous.

"Sit down, gentlemen, and compose yourselves," the sport coolly requested, waving the pair to seats upon the edge of the bed. "You will excuse me a moment. I haven't finished my toilet!"

"Toilet!—ther deuce!" spluttered Major Marker, jumping to his feet, while the color in his face deepened to purple.

"Don't ye know, Shasta Sam, thet ye're standin' on ther aide of an earthquake—thet minutes right now aire more precious than hours yistiddy or to-morrer?"

The Sparkler shook his head in amazement.

"No, I really do not know it," he returned. "Explain."

Then the major and the landlord exchanged glances, and the former nodded vehemently.

"Didn't I tell 'em jest thet!" he exclaimed, exultantly. "I swore my new pard war innercent, an' I didn't tell no lie!"

"Oh, I felt that it was all a mistake," hastily averred Peter Swift. "There was an utter lack of motive; there was no reason in the world why Shasta Sam should stain his hands with the old man's blood; and so I said."

The Sparkler looked from one to the other, a slight frown wrinkling his usually smooth brow. It was plain that he was mystified.

"Explain, gentlemen," he requested, curtly. "You speak in riddles!"

"I'll make et plain all too soon, my pard," returned the major regretfully.

"Old Antelope was found dead in ther street this mornin', an' thar be some who hints only too plainly thet et war your hand thet struck him down!"

Shasta Sam started, then his lips curled scornfully.

"Old Antelope is dead, and they say I killed him, do they?" he exclaimed, his black eyes flashing from man to man.

"Well, the charge is utterly false. I am ready to face them."

"Easy, pardner—slow an' easy!" cautioned Major Marker, raising his pudgy right hand, as if in entreaty. "We must look ther thing square in ther face, an' meet proof with proof, fer et's a puffetly safe bet they've got a nasty case sot up ag'in ye."

"Oh, yes. I can readily understand that they have left no stone unturned," the Sparkler assured. "There is just about a million dollars at stake in this game, and that amount of money is sufficient to set the wits of these sharpers on keenest edge. They have divined my mission in Blue Jacket, and are determined to rid themselves of me."

Both the major and the landlord looked surprised.

"You're a detective?" ventured Peter Swift, after a moment's silence.

"Oh, no! I'm nothing of the kind," the sport quickly declared. "I'm plain Sam Shelby—Shasta Sam, the Sparkler, if you please, and I've clipped into the game—well, just for the percentage! More than that I cannot tell you now, save that the job before me is one no man need be ashamed to be caught at."

The veteran promptly extended his hand.

"Putt et thar, Shasta Sam," he exclaimed. "Ye kin 'pend upon me till ther crack o' doom!"

"And here, too," Landlord Peter Swift chimed in, as he grasped the Sparkler's hand. "The major can tell you I formed a mighty good opinion of you, first off, and I'm not a bit shaken in it. Count me as an ally."

"Thanks, gentlemen! I appreciate your friendship more than words can

tell," was Shasta Sam's smiling response. "But don't incur trouble or make enemies on my account. I'm a bird of passage—here to-day, gone to-morrow. Let me hoe my own row; if worse comes to worse, I'll flush my hand, and if that fails to save me, you may chip in—and mighty welcome!"

"Ye mean—"

"Just what I've said," cut in the Sparkler, rightly interpreting the major's puzzled look. "Fall in line with the gang, both of you, and you can serve me well! One man training with them can do me more real good, if he's so minded, than half a dozen openly for me."

Then the sport hastily outlined the plan which had suggested itself to him, and his friends, nodding acquiescence, made ready to quit the room.

"Be a bit careful," the landlord cautioned. "The house is surrounded, and the marshal is waiting for you down stairs."

Shasta Sam simply nodded. The next minute he was alone.

"Now, to prepare for war, for it is to be war, indeed," he muttered, carefully closing and locking the door. "Out of my promise to the dead grows this strange strife, but be true I must, though the end be death."

Quickly concluding his toilet, the Sparkler opened his trunk and took therefrom a brace of heavy revolvers and thrust them into his belt in lieu of the weapons taken from him by his abductors the preceding night.

Then into a secret pocket of the trunk he thrust a packet of papers, closed the lid and locked it.

"Now, I am ready," he mused, and, passing into the corridor, he locked the door, thrust the key into his pocket and descended to the dining room.

At the moment he entered, the place was deserted, but the Sparkler quietly seated himself at a table, and then the landlord's daughter came in from the kitchen.

"The marshal is waiting in there," she announced, in a low voice, while staring steadily at the door leading into the barroom. "Father said that if you desired to escape you should follow me."

Again Shasta Sam's brows gathered in an ominous frown, which as quickly disappeared as he noted the pallor of the girl's face.

"I thank you, but I have no desire to escape," he returned, gently.

The girl uttered a sigh of relief.

"I was sure you would not go!" she exclaimed, a faint flush stealing into her face as she met the Sparkler's earnest gaze. "I know that you are innocent!"

At that moment Long Dave Sly, the marshal, bustled noisily into the room, closely followed by Major Marker.

The landlord's daughter hastily retreated to the kitchen.

"Ah, hah, sport!—ye're up at last, I see!" the official greeted. "Ye're just in time ter save trouble."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, I was jest goin' up ter rout ye out, an' hyar ye meet me hafe-way," and the marshal grinned broadly.

"Oh, I like to be neighborly," the Sparkler coolly assured.

"You have business with me?"

The marshal nodded, and his face grew stern.

"Jest thet, Shasta Sam," he replied, his hand dropping upon his revolver butt. "Ye aire charged with the murder of Old Antelope, an' I reckon ye're my prisoner!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MARSHAL RESIGNS.

A peculiar smile curled Shasta Sam's lips, and for a full minute he looked the marshal straight in the eyes.

"Very well; we'll consider that I'm your prisoner," he returned, at length. "But before we proceed further, let's understand each other thoroughly."

"You say I am charged with the murder of Old Antelope?"

"Exactly!"

"Who makes the charge?"

"I do!"

Again the Sparkler smiled in that peculiar way, and Long Dave Sly bit his lips in vexation.

"You are fully empowered by law to make this arrest?"

"Yas, sirree! I am ther marshal o' Blue Jacket, an' my word goes—you bet!" boasted the ruffian.

"There'll be a preliminary hearing here, and then I'll be carried to Rocky Bar for trial, I suppose?"

"No, sirree!" the marshal exclaimed, indignantly. "In a case o' this kind, whar ther proof is plain, Jedge Lynch tries ther case, an' et ends right thar. Thar's no foolishness—no monkey business of eny kind!"

Shasta Sam uttered a whistle of mock surprise.

"And suppose the prisoner demurs!" he asked, in that same cool, quiet way.

"An' what's thet?" demanded the marshal, testily.

"Suppose he kicks—objects?"

"I s'pose he'd be good fer a hide full o' holes," the marshal declared, tapping the butt of his revolver.

"But ye've talked a heap plenty fer one time, Shasta Sam, an' I do reckon we'd better be movin' on down ter ther calaboose."

Then the sport drew back from the table, and rose to his feet.

At the same instant his right hand swung to a level, and Long Dave Sly, to his intense disgust, found the muzzle of a cocked revolver staring him in the face.

"Steady! you murderous dog!" warned Shasta Sam, coldly, a grim smile playing about the corners of his mouth. "Steady!—and listen:

"You know who killed Old Antelope—you know that my hand did not strike the blow!"

"I am ready for trial. At the hour set I shall be on hand—not as a helpless prisoner at the mercy of the roughs of Blue Jacket, but just as I am now—armed and ready to exact for myself a square deal!"

"Oh, yes!—ye'll be thar!" the ruffian sneered, in a voice quivering with rage, while his face turned a sickly, yellowish white. "Given hafe a chaine—"

That snarling fling ended in a howl of terror.

Thrusting his revolver into its holster, Shasta Sam had suddenly darted forward, and his open right hand fell sharply across the marshal's lips.

"Take that for a lesson in good manners!" he flashed, his black eyes sparkling angrily. Then his fist shot out, and the ruffian fell in a heap.

"Major Marker, have the kindness to drag that brute into the street," the Sparkler requested, as he calmly reseated himself at the table, to await his breakfast. "Say to his friends that I shall be at leisure presently, and ready to give them satisfaction, if they so wish."

"Et's a puffedly safe bet they won't want none!" the veteran chuckled, in a subdued voice. "They're all out yen-way, waitin' with a rope; but when they find ye're up an' around, doin' business et ther same ole stand—wal, I reckon they'll figger out thet the job's best left till night!"

"You think, then—"

"They've got no leader," the veteran continued, with a wary glance at the recumbent marshal. "One's afraid an' t'other dassent; an' when they do make a break a glimpse o' ther bell wether will give us a line on ther parties back o' ther game."

"Yes, that is true," assented the Sparkler. "I think our friend, the marshal, is done with the whole matter—that is, so far as an open play is concerned. He is a dull brute, and, if I mistake not, is ignorant of the fact that he is simply a catspaw in the hands of artful schemers. It follows, then, that when he declines to go ahead some one else must be put forward."

"Wal, I'll be right in ther crowd," the veteran declared, complacently. "Ef

anything turns up I'll contrive ter let ye know."

Then Major Marker raised the form of the unconscious marshal from the floor and strode into the barroom.

The place was closed, with the doors and windows securely barred, for Peter Swift was a prudent, cautious man. He knew that if the turbulent crowd gained access damage would be done.

From his seat behind the bar the landlord had heard all that occurred in the dining room, and as the veteran entered with his burden he promptly came forward.

The marshal was placed upon one of the tables, and the two men set to work with whisky and water to revive him.

A few minutes sufficed to bring the ruffian to his senses, and he sat up with a snort of disgust.

"Woof!" he grunted, tenderly feeling his jaw. "Thet settles me es marshal o' this hyar camp! No more in mine!"

"W'at!" the veteran exclaimed, in surprise. "Aire ye goin' ter give up?"

"Edzactly! I'm goin' ter resign!"

The landlord shook his head.

"I wouldn't think o' doing et, Dave," he declared, earnestly. "Ef you do, Blue Jacket will be too hot to hold you!"

"Cain't help thet! My min's made up! Thar's too mighty many hard knocks an' too blamed leetle gold an' glory in et fer me," the ruffian asserted, and he got off the table and walked across to the bar.

Then the three carefully talked the matter over.

But Dave Sly was fully determined. He was wofully crestfallen over his signal defeat at the hands of the Sparkler, and his courage seemed to have utterly vanished.

After a few minutes he left the hotel, accompanied by Major Marker, and the news of his resignation quickly spread through the camp.

Then, true to the landlord's prediction, a hooting crowd gathered around the recreant; he was seized and placed astride a rail, and borne out of camp, with an injunction never to return under penalty of death.

That done, Blue Jacket turned out en masse to elect a new marshal.

The man selected was none other than Red Belt, the Sport!

Shasta Sam had boldly appeared upon the street shortly after the discomfiture of Marshal Sly, and when he heard the name of the new official he smiled grimly.

"At last the enemy is showing his hand!" he muttered.

Contrary to general expectation, however, no further attempt was made during the day to arrest the Sparkler.

"Shasta Sam will be on hand when wanted, never fear," the new marshal declared, when approached concerning the matter. "He is not one to run away, I know, and should he try it—well, the trail would be a short one!"

And with that the hotheads of the camp were compelled to rest content, for all feared the Red Belt Sport, while none cared to try conclusions with Shasta Sam.

During the afternoon the funerals of Solomon Zebender and Old Antelope occurred. By common consent, the mines had been closed for the day, and the whole camp was idle.

"It looks like a bad night," Peter Swift remarked, late in the afternoon, with a dubious shake of his head, to Shasta Sam. "The boys have been drinking a good deal to-day, there are quite a number of strangers in from the hills, and if the mayor holds court to-night there's almost sure to be trouble."

"It certainly does look squally," the Sparkler responded. "But as these matters can't be helped, they'll have to run their course."

At that moment the Red Belt Sport appeared. Stopping beside Shasta Sam, he tapped him lightly upon the shoulder, saying:

"My friend, his Honor, the mayor, will hold court to-night, to try the case

in which you are involved, and you are requested to be on hand promptly at seven o'clock.

"Personally, I do not believe you guilty, though of the proof against you I know nothing.

"I trust that you understand me—that you feel that this duty is not of my seeking?"

"I understand you perfectly," was Shasta Sam's quiet response.

"Have no fear. I will meet his Honor promptly at seven o'clock to-night."

CHAPTER XIV.

ZETTA AND GILES.

That Zetta Zebender was deeply grieved at the death of her father, Solomon, the miser, all who called at the Zebender cabin that bright March day could readily believe.

It is true that she was not to be seen—that she was fast locked in that end of the cabin which had ever been assigned to her private use; but numerous tokens of love and affection were there to betray the grief of the daughter's heart. All that was mortal of Solomon Zebender lay in a rude pine coffin, shaven and shrouded, bereft of the miserable rags which in life had distinguished him from his fellows.

Giles Honeyfang, his heavy, brutal face discolored and swollen with the marks of his two encounters with Shasta Sam, was on duty throughout the forenoon, and he it was who walked beside Zetta Zebender as the dismal funeral procession wended its way across the valley to the burying ground, known to Blue Jacket as "Pilgrims' Repose."

No minister was there, with fervent words of hope and spiritual cheer, to soften the sharp rattle of the half-frozen clods as they pattered down upon the rude coffin; yet, Zetta Zebender stood unmoved, no sigh, no tear, bearing witness that her heart was touched with a single thrill of sorrow or pity.

Calmly, stolidly she stood until the grave was filled and the telltale mound rose above the surrounding level, then turned and slowly recrossed the narrow valley to the desolate cabin, with Giles Honeyfang stalking doggedly at her heels.

There was a peculiar look upon the ruffian's face—a look difficult to analyze. It bespoke both fear and determination, jealousy and rage.

Just inside the cabin door Zetta Zebender paused and turned squarely around, facing her follower. Her dark face was now white and drawn, and her black eyes, swollen from weeping, seemed fairly to blaze with intense anger.

"Well?" she demanded, sharply.

Giles Honeyfang recoiled and grew pale, then the blood rushed to his face and he shook his huge fist savagely.

"Business—jest business!" he returned, in a voice hoarse with pent-up fury. "Ther old man's dead, an' et lies bechuxt you an' me, an'—et's got ter be settled!"

"You are mad, man!—crazy!" Zetta retorted, a wan smile crossing her thin lips. "Your path and mine separate from this hour! You go your way—I'll go mine!"

"Wal an' good when—ye know ther agreement, gal!" cried Honeyfang, savagely. "Ther old man swore we should divide—"

"There's nothing to divide!" cut in Zetta, sternly.

The ruffian started back, aghast. But his perturbation was only momentary. A cunning leer crossed his face, and he laughed aloud.

"Very good!—we'll see!" he exclaimed, half turning. "Ther Estell gal lives, an' I kin find her. Or, Shasta Sam—"

"Stop!" And with that sharp, half-defiant, half-pleading cry, Zetta Zebender stamped the floor fiercely. "Do not cast reproach upon my father!"

"Wal, ther ole man's dead, an' they cain't hurt him," pursued the ruffian, his pale gray eyes fixed steadily upon that partially averted face. "Thar's a good

stake in clearin' ther thing up, an' I do reckon Shasta Sam—"

"Oh, no, no!" Zetta interrupted. "Never that!"

"Wal, then—what?"

"Name your terms!" desperately.

"Just a full hafe!"

"Of my father's money—yes! Of the Estell estate, not one penny!"

"Ye mean—"

"The money shall go to its rightful owners!" flashed Zetta.

Honeyfang whistled and cocked one eye derisively.

"You don't mean et!" he jeered.

"Yes, I do mean it. Such was my father's last wish."

"He was crazy! He made the fortune."

"I do not care to discuss that. Let it answer that I shall follow his instructions."

"Girl! Ye dare not!"

Zetta's lips curled contemptuously.

"We shall see!" she retorted. "What have I to fear?"

"Ye forget what happened last night!"

"I forget nothing. I was compelled, through fear, to tell an untruth to save you."

"Now, have a care, Giles Honeyfang! I no longer fear you. The truth will hang you, and the truth shall be known!"

"What! Do you threaten?" and the ruffian's eyes glittered balefully.

"No; but Wild Nell told the simple truth, and you are implicated in the death of Old Antelope!"

"Girl, ye are wrong!"

"No, Giles Honeyfang, I am not wrong, and I warn you to go your way."

"The money taken from the estate of Ishmael Estell shall be returned, dollar for dollar, and any attempt at interference upon your part shall bring the halter to your neck!"

The voice of the girl, while subdued, rang with sternness, and the revolver she had drawn warned the ruffian that she was in deadly earnest.

A coward at heart, he shrank back in alarm, while from his lips came the plea:

"Don't blame me, girl! 'Twas ther ole man led me inter ther game!"

"But I am pore—mis'abul pore, an' all thet Estell wealth is a powerful temptation ter a sinner like me."

"Give me hafe o' what ther ole man left, an' I'll go my way."

Nodding curtly, Zetta Zebender turned, entered the cabin and closed the door. When she reappeared, there was a thin packet of crisp new bank notes in her hand.

"Two hundred and fifty dollars, Giles—enough to dress you decently and support you until you can find work," she said, dropping the money in his huge hand.

"I go from this cabin to the hotel for a few days, then leave Blue Jacket forever. If the place will be of service to you, you are free to use it."

With a mumbled word of thanks, Giles Honeyfang thrust the money into his pocket, turned and started rapidly down the slope to the camp.

CHAPTER XV.

THE METAMORPHOSIS.

Like one in a dream, Giles Honeyfang descended to the valley, his dull brain busy with plots for the future.

Just at the foot of the mountain, in the last building on the southern end of the winding, irregular street, was a saloon, gambling-hall and dance-room, known under the blanket title of "Paddy's Glory."

The proprietor was Paddy McGovern, a lank, lean Irishman, not many years from the "Ould Dart," and the place was reputed to be the toughest in Blue Jacket.

For something more than a year past, this dive had been the rendezvous of Honeyfang and a half-dozen congenial spirits, and as the ruffian neared the place he quickened his steps and entered.

A number of men lounged about the place on rude benches and boxes, while in a rear corner four miners were seated at a table, playing cards.

Noisily banging the door behind him, Honeyfang strode up to the bar, rapped loudly with his fist, and cried:

"Come up, pard, one an' ali, an' gaze on ther new chief o' Blue Jacket!"

A hush came over the ill-ordered place. Giles Honeyfang was well-known to all present, but he now appeared in a new role, and great was the wonderment thereat.

But, to a man the loungers and the players arose and came forward, for all feared the ruffian.

Paddy McGovern deftly set out bottles and glasses, and then all drank to the health of Giles Honeyfang.

Then, as the crowd fell back, McGovern winked slyly and drew the ruffian aside.

"Whist! mon!—et's yersel' oi've wanted to see, dhe whole day long!" he whispered, gently pulling Honeyfang aside. "Sure, now dhat dhe ould mon's dead, an' ye're dhe nixt best in dhe fam'bly, et's yersel' as should know et!"

The ruffian nodded in a knowing way, and the Irishman continued:

"Et's about dhis new sport in camp—dhis Shasta Sam. Sure, now, an' dhey do say dhat dhe onmannerly omadhoun be castin' about ter get a grip on dhe Good Luck Mine; dhat he's kicked yez out o' houst an' home dhis blissid minute, an' dhat dhe miser's daughter is in on dhe deal to git rid o' yez an' kape yer share."

Red grew the face of Giles Honeyfang, and he glared fiercely at the saloonist. Then his fist shot out, and Paddy McGovern measured his length on the floor.

"Et's a lie!" Honeyfang savagely declared, and then he turned and strode out of the place.

But that thrust, so adroitly given, had borne fruit. The iron had entered the ruffian's soul, and from that moment Shasta Sam was playing with fire.

Without so much as a backward glance, Honeyfang strode up the street, his dull brain busy with the thoughts awakened by Paddy McGovern's words.

"Fine feathers make fine birds," he muttered. "Ther sport is a top-notch fer dress, an' et's on'y nacheral people should size him up es a big chief. But Mose Goldberg, he's es fine es ther finest, an' we'll see!"

Moses Goldberg, it may be remarked, was the principal merchant of Blue Jacket. He was, as his name indicated, a Jew, and his place of business was a long, low frame building about a hundred yards north of the Idaho House.

Owing to the excitement in camp, trade had been extremely dull during the day, and when Honeyfang entered the store he found the proprietor wonderfully glad to receive him.

"Vell, mine goot fr'ent, v'ot can I do for you?" Goldberg exclaimed, briskly rubbing his thin, claw-like hands, as he stepped into view from behind a stack of merchandise. "Some clodings, eh?"

"Right ye aire, Israel," Honeyfang responded. "Ther best ye got, too—some-thin' dead swagger."

"Vell, mine tear fr'ent, dose vas t'e kindt ve keeps," the Jew assured. "Te fery pest on earth an' notings else."

Then he briskly led the way to the clothing counter, and a moment later Giles Honeyfang was deeply engrossed in the task he had set himself.

Naturally, the Jew's stock was limited, and it required but a few minutes for Honeyfang to make a selection. He chose a brown-and-white plaid suit, of extra large and loud figure, and at once retired to the rear of the store and put it on.

Then, at an adroit suggestion from Goldberg, he purchased a laundered shirt and collar, and a flowing red silk tie, and with these articles he proceeded to further adorn himself.

The effect was startling, as Honeyfang was forced to admit when he surveyed himself in the glass.

The sack coat was extremely short, and the pants fit his sturdy legs snugly, while the flaming tie harmonized well with his bristling red beard.

"Min tear fr'ent, you need now one of t'ose fine Proadvay silk hats und a bair of t'ose Prince of Vales shoes, und you vill be t'e pest dressed man in t'e Territory, so hellup me, chiminy!" the Jew assured, most graciously. "You would t'en pe tressed ver t'e pest society, und t'e atmiration of all t'e vimmens."

"Ye've got me right whar I live, Ikey!" grinned Honeyfang, and he bought the shoes and the hat, and donned them.

Then some few minor purchases were made, and just at dusk the metamorphosed ruffian started out in quest of the barber.

There was no regular shop in Blue Jacket, but a short distance above Goldberg's place was a small hotel run by a middle-aged German, who was said to possess considerable skill in the tonsorial art, and to this man Honeyfang went.

A bargain was quickly made, and when the ruffian reappeared upon the street a half hour later his best friend could hardly have recognized him.

The matted red beard had disappeared, leaving only a bristling mustache and imperial, while the heavy thatch of red hair had been cut close to the scalp.

Now that his face was fairly uncovered, the ruffian was more repulsive-looking than ever; but he swung jauntily down the street, cane in hand, puffing fiercely at a long, black cigar, at ease with himself; for he was confident that his conquest of Blue Jacket Camp would now be speedy and sure.

It was shortly after seven o'clock when he reached the Idaho House, and as he stepped into the barroom a sharp gasp of surprise escaped his lips.

The trial of Shasta Sam for the murder of Old Antelope was in progress, and the place was crowded.

CHAPTER XVI. THE TRIAL.

The mayor of Blue Jacket, Kenneth Morgan by name, was in many respects a peculiar man.

He was a bachelor of uncertain age, tall and angular, with piercing dark eyes, prominent nose, bushy gray hair, and a huge gray beard that reached to his middle. He dressed well, was a fair shot, never gambled, and never drank, but was an inveterate smoker.

From the earliest days of the camp he had held the position of manager of the Good Luck Mine, and was said to be one of the wealthiest of Blue Jacket's citizens.

He owned the best house in the camp, a modern six-room cottage, in which he lived alone with an elderly negro manservant to attend him, and those who had been favored with a view of the interior reported that it was most luxuriously furnished.

Then, Kenneth Morgan was a man of excellent education, a finished musician, and an accomplished artist, and the people of Blue Jacket often marveled that he remained in their midst.

When the murder of Old Antelope and the accusation against Shasta Sam was duly brought to his notice by Red Belt, the new marshal, the mayor promptly named the place and set the hour for the trial, and then was punctually on hand to hear the case.

Exactly at seven o'clock Shasta Sam coolly walked into the Sports' Resort, and then, at a word from the mayor, the crowd was called to order and the court was opened without ceremony.

"Prisoner at the bar, you will state your name and age," the mayor ordered.

"Samuel Shelby, aged twenty-eight," was the calm response.

"You are charged with the murder, last night, of one Abram Moselle, better known as Old Antelope, the hunter. Are you guilty or not guilty?"

The Sparkler started slightly, and his expression changed, but in an unfaltering voice he replied:

"Not guilty!"

"Are you ready for trial?"

"I am ready."

Then the mayor and the marshal held a whispered conference, and Red Belt called the first witness to the stand.

It was Doctor Jeremiah Samuels.

The doctor testified to finding the body of Old Antelope in the middle of the street that morning, just at daybreak. The body was warm yet. Death had been caused by a knife wound through the heart. The knife remained in the wound.

At this point the mayor handed the witness a bowie knife.

"Can you identify that weapon?" he asked.

"I can, and I do," Dr. Samuels replied. "It is the weapon I found thrust through the heart of Old Antelope."

Then the blade was handed to Shasta Sam.

"It is mine," he averred, simply.

A murmur of ominous import rose from the crowd, and it was with no little difficulty that order was restored.

After a moment Dr. Samuels was excused, and another witness was called to the chair.

This fellow was Pious Pete, known as one of Red Belt's "cripples."

By him it was shown that Major Marker, Shasta Sam, and Old Antelope had ridden into camp together at a late hour in the night; that when near the hotel the party had dismounted and separated, Major Marker going on to the corral with the horses, while Shasta Sam and his alleged victim continued down the street together.

Major Marker was then placed on the stand. His testimony simply confirmed Pious Pete's story.

Other witnesses were examined, and, although nothing new was elicited, the case looked extremely dark for Shasta Sam.

True, no one had seen him strike the fatal blow, nor was there an apparent motive for the crime; but his was the knife that had robbed the old hunter of life, and it was clearly proved that they had been together but a moment before the tragedy occurred.

Again threats loud and deep rose from the crowd, and it required the united efforts of the mayor and the marshal to restore order.

Then another whispered conference was held, and Shasta Sam was called to testify in his own behalf.

Clearly and succinctly, the Sparkler narrated the details of his abduction and escape, dwelling especially upon the fact that he had been disarmed while unconscious, and that his escape had depended wholly upon his good fortune in securing a revolver from the belt of one of his captors.

When Shasta Sam had ended, it was at once seen that his narrative had created a most favorable impression upon the minds of many present, and when Major Marker had been recalled to the stand to corroborate almost in detail the Sparkler's story, belief in the innocence of the accused was greatly strengthened.

But the murder was yet shrouded in mystery; the evidence, though circumstantial, was strongly against the defendant, and Mayor Morgan rose and, with visible reluctance, stated that, unless further evidence could be at once introduced, he would be "compelled to hold the defendant, Samuel Shelby, to appear before the court of proper jurisdiction!"

To those familiar with the processes of law peculiar to Blue Jacket, the mayor's words were equivalent to a death sentence; for it meant commitment, without bail, to the calaboose, until such time as the prisoner could be carried to Rocky Bar. In the camp's history, eight men had thus been confined, and each of the eight had met death at the hands of Judge Lynch.

Shasta Sam realized as much. Yet his face did not change, and he met the mayor's gaze with smiling unconcern.

Then came a brief hush, and all eyes seemed fixed upon the Sparkler.

The mayor cleared his throat to speak again, but before so much as a syllable could pass his lips, Zetta Zebender suddenly burst through the inner circle of the crowd and confronted the court.

Dressed in deepest black, her face corpse-like in pallor, her black eyes fairly glowing with nervous excitement, the daughter of the dead miser was at once fascinating and terrible.

"I want to testify in this case!" she announced, in a tremulous voice, her eyes sparkling brightly, as they drank in each detail of the scene. "I wish to testify for that gentleman," pointing to the accused. "I know something about this case, and I believe I should tell it!"

A ripple of surprise came from the crowd, and Shasta Sam fancied the mayor changed color.

"I know all about the killing of Old Antelope," pursued the girl, rapidly. "I saw the blow struck—I saw the men who did it! They are the two ruffians known as Ute Jack and Sugar Foot! There they stand!"

Sharply, almost venomously, each word, clear and distinct as a pistol shot, came the girl's revelation, and then from the crowd came a sharp, sudden roar—a violent surging to and fro!

Vainly the entrapped miscreants struggled to escape. Stifled, beaten into insensibility, they were quickly dragged to the street, and thence to the calaboose.

Caught in that mad whirl, in his effort to preserve order, Red Belt, the marshal, was borne into the street before he could extricate himself, and it was not until the culprits had been safely imprisoned that he reappeared in the Sports' Resort.

Then the court resumed the trial. It required but a few minutes for Zetta Zebender to finish her testimony; and it was so plain, direct, and convincing that there could be but one conclusion.

The prisoner was discharged.

CHAPTER XVII. ZETTA'S PERIL.

Congratulations were fairly showered upon Shasta Sam when it was known that he was acquitted, and he quickly found himself surrounded by the most prominent citizens of the camp, including the mayor, Kenneth Morgan, all of whom were eager to take him by the hand.

His frank and fearless bearing throughout the affair had won him many friends, and he could not help thinking that, trying as was the ordeal, it had been a most fortunate one for him.

"Et's a puffedly safe bet thet ye're ther comin' cock o' this walk," Major Marker declared, when he had at length gotten the Sparkler safely aside. "Trim ther comb o' this Red Belt, an' et's a hoss ag'in a jack-rabbit thet ye'll hev plain an' easy scratchin' ahead."

Shasta Sam nodded and smiled, and, abruptly changing the subject, asked:

"Major, do you know where Wild Nell and Old Antelope's wife are stopping?"

The veteran shook his head.

"I don't, pard," he replied. "But I kin easy locate 'em."

"Do so, but go about it quietly. I must see Wild Nell to-night, secretly, and without fail. You will find me right here in just an hour."

Without a word, Major Marker nodded, turned, and walked away, while the Sparkler approached the bar for a moment's talk with Peter Swift.

The landlord was in high good humor, but extremely busy. He warmly grasped the hand of the sport, leaving in it a folded slip of paper.

"It came down for you a moment ago," he explained, guardedly. "Miss Zebender sent it, I think. I will see you again presently."

Shasta Sam at once withdrew to the dining room, where he opened and read the note.

It was, as the landlord had suggested, a message from Zetta Zebender. It was in a coldly formal tone, and requested the pleasure of an interview "with Mr.

Samuel Shelby at his earliest convenience," in the parlor of the Idaho House.

The "parlor" of the Idaho House was a new one to Shasta Sam; but Lena, the landlord's daughter, promptly explained that it was a large room on the second floor, extending across the front of the hotel, and fitted up as a lounging place for those of the guests for whom the barroom and card tables possessed no attractions.

Thanking the girl for her information, Shasta Sam glanced at his watch, and at once betook himself in the direction of the parlor.

Elated at the thought that Shasta Sam, whom he hated so bitterly, was on trial for his life, Giles Honeyfang had edged his way through the crowd to a position in front of the bar.

The ruffian was in high glee. He felt that fortune was indeed beginning to smile upon him. Not only would Zetta, the daughter of the dead miser, find his grip upon the Estell estate firm and relentless, but there was almost a certainty that the Sparkler would dangle at a rope's end before the break of another day.

So, listening with keen relish to the damaging testimony against Shasta Sam, he drank freely, while hoping that the end of the trial might not long be delayed. Deep in his wolfish heart was a burning desire to be in at the death of the Sparkler, and he was fully determined to assist in the execution.

Then came that brief lull, so significant in itself—swiftly followed by the sudden and startling appearance of Zetta Zebender as a witness in Shasta Sam's behalf!

A sickening fear, which quickly resolved itself into a horrible certainty, fastened upon the heart of Giles Honeyfang. His face grew fairly livid, his pale gray eyes snapped and flamed with despairing fury, and the empty glass in his hand fell unheeded to the floor, to be dashed into a hundred pieces.

The babbling of Paddy McGovern had been true!

Zetta Zebender was in league with the Sparkler—there was a secret understanding between them!

These thoughts flashed through the reeling brain of the ruffian, and then he became conscious of a feeling of fierce resentment against the girl.

Evading the rush of that madly surging crowd bearing Ute Jack and Sugar Foot to their well-merited captivity, Giles Honeyfang slipped back into the dining room, and thence up-stairs to the parlor.

Zetta Zebender had preceded the ruffian but a moment.

On entering the room, she had closed the door and walked straight to a small mirror hanging on one of the walls.

A glance showed that her cheeks were slightly flushed, and that her black eyes were sparkling with subdued excitement.

At that moment the door was stealthily opened, and Giles Honeyfang entered.

At sight of the ruffian, Zetta's look changed. The complacent smile faded from her face—the faint dash of color from her cheeks. Astonishment, disgust, and intense loathing flashed from her small but expressive eyes.

"Giles Honeyfang!" she exclaimed, with uplifted hands.

"Same old Giles!" the ruffian responded, a trifle unsteadily, as he cocked the new silk hat over one eye and flourished his cane. "Ain't ye proud o' me, Zetta?"

And he began walking slowly to and fro in front of the woman, as if anxious for a verdict on his changed appearance.

For a moment the woman viewed him with silent scorn and contempt. Then a burst of mocking, mirthless laughter came from her tightly-drawn lips.

"I have always insisted that you were a fool, Giles Honeyfang!" she exclaimed, scornfully. "Now I know I have always been right!"

Giles nodded and chuckled.

"I hev been a fool," he slowly admit-

ted, his heavy, clumsy fingers working curiously. "I knows thet I'm not quite up ter ther limit in hoss-sense or good looks. But—I've come for the papers, Zetta!"

The girl tossed her head; she stamped the floor angrily.

"No!" she cried, in fierce excitement. "You cannot have them! They go into the hands of Mr. Shelby, for the Estell heirs!"

Honeyfang dropped his cane and stared hard at the girl.

"Is thet straight?" he demanded, a tigerish gleam breaking through the dullness of his eyes.

"It is straight!" Zetta retorted.

"Paddy McGovern told ther truth!" the ruffian muttered. Then, with a sudden bound, he reached the maiden, caught her by the throat, and shook her viciously.

"Ther papers, or yer last hour hes come, Zetta Zebender!" he hissed, drawing and cocking a revolver with his free hand. "Solomon Zebender played with me fer years—an' played with fire!"

A look of abject terror came into the girl's face, and she struggled weakly to throw off the powerful grip on her throat; she tried to cry aloud for help, but that same firm and pitiless hand choked back the sound.

She drew the papers from her pocket and dashed them on the floor.

At that juncture the door was suddenly thrown open, and Shasta Sam stepped into the room.

At the same instant Giles Honeyfang flung the woman from him, grasped the papers, and whirled around. At sight of the Sparkler a sharp, fierce cry of exultation escaped him, and he swung his revolver to a level and fired twice.

At that close and deadly range the bullets could not go astray. Shasta Sam staggered back and reeled blindly, then drew himself together and with the resistless fury of an enraged lion sprang straight at the throat of the murderous ruffian.

CHAPTER XVIII. PLOTTING.

As soon as he could win clear of the turbulent, restless throng in the Sports' Resort, at the close of Shasta Sam's trial, Kenneth Morgan, the mayor of Blue Jacket, lighted a fresh cigar, plunged into the street, and started for home.

His cottage stood upon a wooded terrace in the mountain-side, just above the northern extremity of the camp, and was reached by a narrow footpath winding upward from the road running through Blue Jacket.

With quick, restless strides the mayor hurried onward, and in a few minutes gained the footpath, where he was joined by a man who had been waiting in the dense shadow of a clump of bushes.

"You are late," this personage remarked, in a tone betraying irritation. "You have kept me waiting."

"My dear fellow, it really couldn't be helped," the mayor assured, placidly. "You must remember that too prompt a flight from the scene of my duties to-night might have caused undesirable talk. Some of the long-headed sports of Blue Jacket might have set it down to disappointment at the result of the trial!"

"Well?"

"Well, they would have been right in their surmise, for we certainly had a remarkable set-back. The goose was cooked and fairly ready to serve when the Zebender girl appeared, broke the platter, and spoiled the feast. Now, pardner, we must do something, and do it quick!"

"Oh, yes; I suppose that's as plain as the nose on a man's face; but, what shall it be?" was the disgruntled response. "This Shasta Sam is not only a lucky galoot, but he's as slippery as an eel. Twice in twenty-four hours he's slipped through our fingers when it seemed there could be no escape for him."

"Well, two failures mustn't discourage

us. The Zebender or Estell million is worth fighting for, and we mustn't give up.

"We must seize Wild Nell and Old Betty Moselle to-night. I have a place to keep them out of sight until Wild Nell makes up her mind to yield her fortune for ransom."

"The little spit-fire will never do it. I've even coaxed and coaxed her to marry me, but it is no go, Kenneth."

"Never is a long time!" quoth the mayor. "But if she declines to come to terms within a reasonable period, so much the worse for her. She will disappear forever, and you can then lay siege to the Zebender girl."

"Heaven forefend! That is indeed a last resort!"

The mayor grew impatient.

"Well, Kent Keene, such was the agreement you made, and it is the line of action you must adhere to, if you would secure the money," he declared, sternly. "Falter now, and I will abandon you and your plot and proceed alone."

"I am not faltering," Kent Keene retorted. "But I am not enamored of the Zebender girl. She fills me with loathing."

Kenneth Morgan laughed harshly.

"Well, better people have been put away," he suggested. "Make your point, gain the money, then free yourself. It is an easy thing."

"Oh, yes," Kent Keene returned, the darkness hiding the frown upon his handsome face. "But we have discussed the point before, and we're losing time. We must get ahead with the work to-night."

"Make good your promise to secure Wild Nell and Old Betty before day, and I will give my undivided attention to Shasta Sam."

"We have bungled miserably in sending our paid bravos against him, for he is one man in a thousand, bold, fearless, and aggressive, and seems to bear a charmed life."

"Then you propose—"

"I intend to go after the sport myself," cut in Kent Keene, in a boastful, arrogant tone. "I fear no man in single combat, for never yet have I met my master. I will rout this Shasta Sam, or send him flying from the camp to save his worthless life!"

Kenneth Morgan nodded approval.

"That is the way to do it," he exclaimed. "Pick a quarrel with the fellow and go after him yourself. The odds are about ten to one that you will be able to turn the trick successfully."

Then footsteps in the distance warned the miscreants to speak even more guardedly, and their voices sank to whispers.

A few minutes sufficed to end that hurried conference; then Kent Keene walked rapidly toward the camp, while Mayor Morgan cast aside his cigar and uttered a single long, loud whistle, of peculiar intonation.

Stepping amid the bushes from which Kent Keene had emerged, the rascally official, while awaiting the response to his call deftly buttoned his coat over his luxuriant beard, and pulled a long, hood-like black mask over his head and face.

A moment elapsed, then stealthy steps drew near, and a husky voice, pitched in cautious strains, called out:

"What-away, boss? Pipe ag'in, will ye?"

Kenneth Morgan stepped out into the trail.

"Come!" he exclaimed, his voice changed beyond recognition by the thick folds of the mask. "Hood yourself an' foller me."

Silently, the fellow obeyed, and the disguised mayor hurriedly led the way across the valley and through the western outskirts of the camp.

There, under the sheltering side of the mountain, and separated from the nearest other habitation by a space of at least a hundred yards, was a snug log cabin.

"Thar is ther place," the mayor an-

nounced, halting in the dense shadow of a pine, some fifty feet from the cabin. "Wild Nell is thar, alone with Old Betty Moselle."

"Now, ther game we is ter play is simple. I'll knock at ther door, an' when ther gal comes I'll grab her. You shet off her wind an' tie her hands, an' then we kin gobble up ther old woman."

"Then I'll run ther critters over ter ther lone pine on the Rocky Bar trail, an' you skip quick an' meet me thar with three horses."

"D'ye see?"

"Oh, yas, Dick Dread, ther game aire so simple two kids could play et," the outlaw replied. "An' then?"

"Then ycu skip back ter camp an' rally ther Red Raiders. We must hold up ther stage from Rocky Bar ter-morrow, fer I hears thar's ter be gold an' greenbacks aboard."

"I'll meet ther boys at Dead Man's Canyon, an' they must be ready fer business."

"Et shell be thet way, boss," the outlaw assured, and then the two men prepared to advance upon the cabin.

But at that juncture a brace of pistol shots rang out on the cool night air, down in the camp. A moment later the reports were followed by a sharp rattling crash, which quickly developed into a veritable babel of confusion.

"Quick! Now is our time!" Dick Dread exclaimed, moving swiftly toward the cabin. "A screech or two will never be heard."

Gaining the door, the outlaw chief rapped sharply.

"Who is there?" came from within, in the clear, bell-like tones of Wild Nell.

"Samuel Shelby," was the quick reply.

A light step resounded on the cabin floor. Then the door was flung open, and Wild Nell stood on the threshold, pistol in hand.

Swiftly, the disguised mayor flung himself forward. One deft stroke sent the revolver flying from the girl's hand, and the next instant she was struggling in his arms.

The second outlaw, with the dexterity of an expert at the work, thrust a gag into the girl's mouth and fastened it, then hastily pinioned her hands.

Not a breath too soon was that task accomplished, however, for Old Betty Moselle sprang up from the rude couch on which she had been lying, fully dressed, and hastily caught up a rifle.

"Onhand thet gal, ye onmanly varmints!" she screeched, her sunken black eyes blazing with rage, as she hobbled toward the door.

"Silence the old dame—quick!" hoarsely commanded the chief, springing back from the door with his helpless burden. "She will ruin all!"

Without a word, the second outlaw leaped boldly into the cabin.

But he little knew the beldame.

The gun in her hands cracked spitefully, and with a single snarling curse he flung up his arms and sank in a heap on the rough wooden floor!

"Curses! is ill luck to last forever?" and with that angry cry upon his lips the disguised mayor turned and fled down the slope with Wild Nell in his arms.

CHAPTER XIX.

A FIGHT AND A CHALLENGE.

Giles Honeyfang's craven heart almost ceased to beat as he looked into the gleaming white face and pitiless eyes of Shasta Sam.

Twice had he fired point-blank at the breast of the sport, at a distance not exceeding ten feet—fired with quick but sure aim, and with intent to kill—and failed!

Then, as he saw the Sparkler leap forward, blind rage took the place of fear, and he again swung his smoking weapon to a level—only to have it dashed aside by the strong arm of the sport!

"You fiend!" grated Shasta Sam, the words coming with a vicious, hissing sound through his hard-set teeth, as his right hand closed sharply upon the ruf-

fian's freshly shaven throat. "You pitiless hound!—you satan's imp!"

Hot, consuming rage choked the utterance of Shasta Sam, usually so cool and steady, and he savagely shook the terrified rough ere hurling him heavily to the floor.

Release from that long, slim, and powerful hand was the one thing wanted by Honeyfang just then. Hardly had he struck the floor when, with a bound and a choking cry of terror, he regained his feet and plunged headlong through the nearest window!

Glass, sash, and shutter gave way with a rattling crash, and the ruffian landed in a heap upon the roof of the rude veranda, extending across the front of the hotel. Just an instant he lay stunned, then roused himself, grasped the edge of the roof and swung himself over, to drop to the earth!

An imprecation burst from the lips of Shasta Sam; and for just a breath he seemed about to follow the ruffian in his headlong flight; then better judgment prevailed, and he stepped out upon the veranda roof, revolver in hand.

"I'll wing him—if he gives me the chance!" he muttered, peering over the edge of the roof. "Mercy to him is mercy wasted—the villainous hound!"

Then to the Sparkler came the rapid patter of running feet, gradually receding in the distance; but in the night, half blinded by that sudden transition from light to darkness, he was unable to locate the fleeing rough.

Alarmed by the varying sounds of that short but fierce battle, the crowd in the Sports' Resort, below stairs, now began surging out upon the street, and the Sparkler hailed the landlord, giving a terse account of the robbery of Zetta Zebender and urging that Honeyfang be captured and brought in alive.

A united yell went up from the crowd, and then men hurried in every direction, determined to hunt down and bring in the cowardly miscreant.

Smiling grimly, Shasta Sam then turned and stepped back into the parlor.

Zetta Zebender lay just as she had fallen, face down in the middle of the floor. Thrusting his revolver into its holster, the Sparkler sprang forward and raised her in his arms.

The girl's face had been badly bruised by the fall; while, worse yet, upon her throat, in black and blue, was the imprint of Giles Honeyfang's fingers!

"The hangman's rope is that scoundrel's portion—sure!" gritted the sport, as his angrily glowing black eyes swept the room for a couch on which to place his helpless burden. "I'd like to save him to wring a bit of truth from his lying lips, but in the end his fate should be the same!"

At that moment Peter Swift burst into the room, closely followed by his wife and daughter, and to them Shasta Sam gladly relinquished his charge.

Pausing only long enough to briefly outline the main feature of Giles Honeyfang's vicious assault upon Zetta Zebender and himself, so far as he knew them, the Sparkler hastily left the parlor and retired to his own room.

That he had not escaped unscathed he knew full well, but as yet he was unable more than to guess at the extent of his injuries.

Locked in his room, however, he quickly stripped off coat, vest, and shirt, exposing to the rays of the lamp that cunningly meshed jacket of steel mail; and then the extent of his wound was easily learned, for both balls rattled harmlessly to the floor!

One shot had snapped a number of the tiny steel rings of which the jacket was woven, and driven the shattered ends inward, tearing and lacerating skin and flesh enough to induce a free flow of blood.

"Only a scratch, after all," Shasta Sam muttered, with a breath of relief. "And yet, I could have sworn, at the moment, that the ball had passed straight through me!"

Carefully dressing the wound, slight as it was, the sport donned his clothing and went down to the barroom.

The place was almost deserted. But three men were in the room, and they rose from a card table, just as Shasta Sam entered, and approached the bar.

The foremost of the trio was a tall, heavily muscled man, who had the appearance of a blacksmith.

And such, indeed, was his calling. He was an Englishman, Amasa Plunkett by name, and, ordinarily, of a quiet, rather retiring disposition.

At the moment we introduce the Englishman to the reader, he was fairly well started upon one of his periodic sprees. He was not drunk, but he had enough liquor in him to render him quarrelsome and make him an extremely ugly customer to handle.

As soon as he saw the Sparkler, he changed his course to intercept him, and tapped him familiarly upon the shoulder.

"'Ello, 'ello!" he exclaimed, in a peculiarly irritating tone. "Hi reckon you're de bloody bloke w'ot dey call Sharsta Sam, 'eh?"

"I am so called," the sport returned, pleasantly. "Now, in the lingo of your own tight little isle, 'w'ot's hit to you?"

The Englishman scowled.

"Don't hinsult me!" he warned, with a menacing gesture. "Hi stoppit you to speak hupon ha subject hof great him-portance. Hi want to hexact ha promise from you."

"Oh, you do, eh?"

"Hi do."

"Well, then, fire away. Explain yourself. For the life of me, I don't know what you're driving at."

"You will find hout soon henough," Plunkett retorted, in an arrogant way, his voice beginning to betray anger. "Hit's habout this young leddy Hi 'ears you've been tryin' to flirt with. Hi just wants to tell you Hi've 'ad my heyes cocked hat 'er mysen, han' hif Hi 'ears hof your advances hagain, H'll break hevery bloody bone kin yer bloomin' body!"

The Sparkler laughed outright.

"Upon my word, it's hard to decide whether you are drunk or crazy," he exclaimed. "What young lady do you mean?"

Then Amasa Plunkett's face grew red with rage.

"To Wild Nell, hof course!" he blustered. "You knows, drot ye! Han' you're pretendin' hof hignorance honly to havoid ha beatin'."

And with that he sent his right hand out in a vicious swing at the jaw of the sport.

Neatly ducking the Englishman's blow, the Sparkler came back with the grace of a dancing master. A stiff right-arm punch, landing directly over the blacksmith's heart, sent him sprawling flat upon his back on the floor.

Amasa Plunkett was terribly surprised.

Not only surprised, but badly hurt.

But he was game to his heart's core. The quarrel was of his own seeking, and he had no intention of quitting until he had whipped his man or was thoroughly whipped himself.

"Stand back!" he panted, as his two friends evinced a desire to run in. "Fair play's de word, hif Hi git ha lickin' fer hit!"

Then he scrambled to his feet, threw himself into position, and rushed savagely at the Sparkler.

Evading that rush by a simple side step, Shasta Sam feinted with his left, then shot his right fist across, straight from the shoulder, landing a terrific blow squarely upon the blacksmith's jaw.

Plunkett required the assistance of his friends to get him up, and they led him away in a dazed condition.

From a position just inside the door the Red Belt Sport had closely watched the encounter, and as Shasta Sam again turned to the bar Red Belt came up and accosted him.

"Well, sport, I notice that along with your other accomplishments, you box a little sometimes," he remarked, in a genial, off-hand manner.

"Oh, yes," the Sparkler returned, carelessly. "I had just stepped down to dampen my throat with a glass of ale, when the Englishman took it into his head that I needed a drubbing and forthwith sailed into give it to me."

"Will you join me?"

"With pleasure."

When both had drunk, Red Belt put down his glass and continued:

"I was glad to see you handle the Englishman so easily, for it confirmed an opinion I had formed that you are a first-class man."

"Now, as it happens, I too, lay claim to some little ability in the fistic art, and your performance just now brought to my mind a proposition, which I have determined to make you."

"To put the matter plainly, Blue Jacket is a small camp, not capable of supporting two high-class sports, and it looks to me like either you or I will have to leave."

"I suspect that you are pretty near right," Shasta Sam admitted, pleasantly.

"Such being the case, I propose that we decide who shall stay and who shall go in a fair and manly way," pursued Red Belt, his tone growing a trifle acrid.

"Suppose that we put up a stake of a couple of thousand dollars each and do a wrestling match for it, the winner to take all, the loser to leave the camp immediately."

"What say you?"

Shasta Sam reflected a moment, then replied:

"I am agreed."

"Well and good. Will you agree also to a final match—a duel with rifles at five hundred yards, at sunrise to-morrow morning?" he returned, abruptly.

The Sparkler nodded assent.

"I'm agreeable! Anything that suits you, suits me," he declared, nonchalantly. "Now for the wrestling bout—when will you be ready?"

"In just five minutes."

CHAPTER XX. SOME SURPRISES.

Meanwhile, a number of the Blue Jacket citizens had returned from a bootless search for Giles Honeyfang, and they hailed the impending bouts between the rival sports with keen delight.

Opinion was about equally divided as to who would be the winner, and many bets were made, the odds being slightly in favor of the Red Belt Sport.

For months past he had been the acknowledged champion of Blue Jacket, and the best men of the camp had gone down before his superior skill and prowess. So the wise ones shook their heads in a knowing way, and prepared to back the Red Belt Sport for all the money they could get up.

Each of the principals had retired to his room to make ready for the fray, and promptly at the end of five minutes both reappeared, stripped to the waist and enveloped in blankets.

The landlord was chosen stakeholder and referee, and the money placed in his hands. That done, each picked a second from the crowd, and walked out to positions near the centre of the room.

Then, the landlord briefly explained the conditions of the match, and the men threw aside their blankets and advanced upon each other.

It was easily seen that Red Belt was the heavier of the two, but to an experienced eye Shasta Sam would have seemed by far the more supple and powerful.

For nearly a minute they circled warily around, just beyond reach of each other. Then, with a cat-like bound, the Red Belt Sport closed in and grappled his adversary.

A sharp breath of surprise went up from the crowd. The next instant there was a confused whirl of arms and legs—a straining and cracking of tendons and muscles. Red Belt was lifted high in the air, then gently lowered, head first, until his naked shoulders fairly touched the floor!

A deep hush greeted the fall, to be

quickly followed by a wild cheer from Shasta Sam's handful of partisans.

Springing up, Red Belt retired to his corner, scowling savagely.

"Curse the luck! The fellow's skill and strength are greater than mine!" he mused, his black eyes shooting glances of hate at his antagonist. "He is a trained wrestler!"

Then came the call of time, and the men again advanced upon each other.

This time the Sparkler "went right after his map," as the saying is. He beat down Red Belt's guard and closed without the loss of an instant, and in another minute the bout was ended.

The Red Belt Sport had again been thrown.

"Shasta Sam wins," the landlord announced, not without a chuckle of delight.

Avoiding the fickle crowd, now so eager to do him homage, Shasta Sam again enveloped himself in his blanket and hastily retired to his room.

In truth, the sport was alarmed. He feared some accident had befallen Major Marker.

It will be remembered that the veteran, when starting in quest of Wild Nell, had promised to meet the Sparkler in the barroom, at a certain time. That time was now past, and Shasta Sam could not help feeling that his friend had met with trouble.

"I will look him up at once," he muttered, hastily dressing himself. "If simply delayed in locating the girl, the major would have come and explained the matter."

"Somehow, I suspect that the gang back of this scheme for the Estell million have discovered that he is secretly working in my interests, and have waylaid him."

"It is a desperate crowd, and I feel assured that this Red Belt and the mayor are the ringleaders. Both are extremely anxious to get me out of Blue Jacket, and it can be for no reason other than that I stand in the way of their possessing themselves of the Estell estate."

"Ah, well! Judge Ichabad Estell should be here to-morrow, and then we can push the fight and force Zetta Zebender or Giles Honeyfang into giving up the miser's secret."

While the sport was thus communing with himself, he had resumed his discarded clothing, and he now freshly charged his weapons and again descended to the barroom.

The hour was late, and many of the crowd had disappeared, but all remaining greeted the Sparkler warmly, and it was with no little difficulty that he at last secured a chance to have a private word with the landlord.

Shasta Sam tersely explained the circumstances and his fears for the safety of the major. The landlord was inclined to laugh at the idea that the veteran had come to harm, saying:

"He's an oily galoot, that Marker is, and he has an unusually long head for one of his habits. Robbery would be about the only object anyone would have in tackling him just now, and he took particular pains to-day to prevent anything of that kind happening, by publicly intrusting his funds to me for safe keeping."

"No, no! I can hardly think any harm has come to him, for he is too astute to be caught in any ordinary trap, as witness his adventure of last night."

"As a matter of fact, I think he has failed to discover the whereabouts of Wild Nell. Old Betty Moselle is that deuced sly that she'll burrow deep, now that some one seems inclined to molest them, and I think you will find that the major has been quietly scouring the camp in search of them. If done cautiously, the errand would require considerable time, small as the place is."

"It may be just as you suggest," the Sparkler admitted. "But I can't dismiss the idea that my premonition will prove true. I feel that my pard has run upon a snag, so will go out and look him up."

"It can do no harm, certainly," re-

turned the landlord. "Indeed, it may be just as you suspect. Some very peculiar things have happened in Blue Jacket of late."

"And that reminds me of this Zebender affair to-night. I fear that the girl is badly hurt; she seems utterly prostrated, and sent down word a while ago that she desired to see you early in the morning, without fail, as she has something of great importance to communicate."

"I will see her," said Shasta Sam, and, nodding, he turned toward the door.

At that moment a woman entered—a tall, spare, old woman, clad in the peculiar garb of the mountains and carrying a long, muzzle-loading rifle at a trail. It was Old Betty Moselle.

Darting a significant glance at the Sparkler, the landlord advanced to meet the woman.

"Good evening, Mrs. Moselle," he greeted, pleasantly.

"Same to ye, Mr. Landlord," the woman returned, in her shrill, high voice. "Be thar a man stoppin' with ye by name o' Sam'l Shelby?"

"There is—he is here," and the landlord turned to Shasta Sam.

The Sparkler promptly came forward, and Old Betty regarded him curiously with her keen, dark eyes.

"Umph! Same one ther gal spoke erbout," she muttered. Then aloud:

"Be ye ther Sam'l Shelby thet writ from Rocky Bar ter my ole man erbout two weeks ago?"

"If you refer to the late Abram Moselle, I am the same," the Sparkler averred.

"An' ye're the same Sam'l Shelby thet sent a Major Marker ter my house a bit sence ter see ef me an' my gal Nell c'u'd talk ter ye a bit ter-night?"

"I am the same, madam."

"Umph!" And again the woman gazed keenly at the sport. "Wal, ther gal's not thar now. Marker hed sca'cely gone, when some one knocked an' guv yer name. Ther gal opened ther door, an' two men grabbed her. They hed hoods over ther heads. I shot one; t'other run away with Nell."

"The mischief!" exclaimed Shasta Sam, his eyes gleaming darkly.

"I trailed him—trailed him right ter his den," the woman continued, without heeding the interruption. "An' I do reckon, Sam'l Shelby, thet ef ye want ter see my Nell so pow'ful bad ye'll hev ter come right erlong an' help break down thet man's door."

"Lead on," exclaimed Shasta Sam, exasperated at the cool and methodical manner of Old Betty.

"And I will go, too," volunteered the landlord.

"The hour is late, and Jim there can take care of the house."

Others promptly volunteered, but the Sparkler, for reasons best known to himself, declined their services, and a minute later Old Betty led the way into the street, and thence straight to the door of Kenneth Morgan.

A peculiar smile flitted across the face of Shasta Sam; but the landlord looked surprised.

At that moment the door opened and the mayor appeared.

CHAPTER XXI. BAFFLED.

Despite the unseasonable hour Kenneth Morgan greeted his visitors with smiling mein, threw wide the door, and invited them to enter.

"You are just in time to catch me awake," he explained, leading the way to the library. "I had just finished some work on the books of the Good Luck Mine, and was locking the house for the night when I heard you coming."

"Books, ye onmanly varlet!" sneered Old Betty, standing stiffly erect in the centre of the room and looking hard at the mayor. "Finished some infarnal divilment, ye mean!"

"I want my gal—my Nell!"

Kenneth Morgan looked both surprised and distressed.

"Your girl—your Nell!" he repeated, in palpable amazement. "Woman, what do you mean?"

"Ye stole my gal!" accused Old Betty, directly. "You know what I mean!"

"Stole your girl!" echoed the mayor, indignantly. "Woman, you are crazy!"

"No, I'm not crazy!"

"Well, you are absurd, at any rate. The charge you make is simply preposterous."

Old Betty shook her clenched hand savagely.

"I don't know what thet means," she cried, shrilly. "But I do know thet you an' another varmint came ter my cabin an' dragged ther gal away. I shot yer pardner, an' he's dead in my cabin now. Then I traileed ye straight hyar. I saw ye drag Nell through ther door!"

"Don't shake yer head—don't lie ter me, Kenneth Morgan! My gal is hyar. I want her. I will have her, or I'll kill ye—jest es you an' yer imps killed my husband!"

The mayor turned to Shasta Sam and the landlord. His face was slightly flushed, and there was an angry glitter in his eyes.

"Gentlemen, you have been good enough to bring this crazy creature to my house. Now, be good enough to take her away," he requested, coldly.

"Kenneth Morgan, we shall have to decline to do anything of the kind, just at present," Shasta Sam returned, in a cool and steady voice. "I am very much of the opinion that Mrs. Moselle has told the naked truth. We came to search this house, and I tell you that nothing shall turn us from our purpose."

"That states the case exactly, mayor," the landlord affirmed.

Kenneth Morgan frowned.

"Certainly, you shall search the house, if you insist," he said; "but I warn you now that your search will be fruitless, and that I shall hold you both to account for the insult you have put upon me."

"Great heavens! Why should I abduct that wild, untutored girl? What object could I possibly have for such a crime?"

"Money, Kenneth Morgan—money!" replied the Sparkler, smiling grimly. "The young lady is an heiress; she is worth nearly a round million—and you know it, too! To an unprincipled scoundrel, such as I believe you to be, possession of the girl would prove a veritable bonanza!"

"Sir! I refuse—"

A forceful gesture from Shasta Sam interrupted the mayor.

"Be silent!" ordered the sport, crisply, his black eyes sparkling with anger. "You asked a question and I am answering it. Rest assured that I shall be as brief as circumstances will permit."

"Wild Nell is the daughter of Ishmael Estell, a wealthy miner who was, it is supposed, secretly murdered years ago in Colorado, by the late Solomon Zebender. As executor, Zebender obtained possession of the estate of the dead miner, and defrauded the natural heirs, a son and a daughter, out of every dollar of their father's fortune. He was also guardian of the two children, and as soon as he was in absolute possession of the estate he heartlessly threw both adrift on the world."

"Happily, the girl, then a helpless tot of five years, fell into the hands of this woman and her husband, Abram Moselle, or Old Antelope. They reared her carefully, gave her a splendid education, and to-day she is fitted to grace and adorn the best stations of life."

"But the boy was far less fortunate. He drifted about from camp to camp, in a nomadic way, until his eighteenth year. At that time he was in Colorado, and one day chanced to overhear a conversation between two miners, in which it was hinted that Zebender had poisoned Ishmael Estell that he might secure his wealth."

"From that hour the youth had an object in life. He was determined to find his sister and punish Zebender. With the patience of an Indian, he followed

that dead trail, sifting every clue, until much of the mystery had been cleared.

"Then Zebender became alarmed. He hired a band of outlaws to put the youth Daniel Estell out of the way, and they succeeded. He was shot down on a lonely trail, in the mountains, and left for the coyotes and the vultures to feed upon."

"It chanced that I came upon him, dying, beside the trail, and from him I heard the story of Zebender's crimes. He begged piteously for me to finish his task—nay, made me swear to do so!"

"That was five years ago. It chanced that I knew of Zebender, and where to find him. I confronted the scoundrel, but his cunning had been most subtle; there was no tangible proof of his guilt, and he laughed at my efforts to make him disgorge his stolen wealth."

"Forced to give over that part of the task for the time, I redoubled my efforts to find the girl, and at last succeeded."

"Now, Kenneth Morgan, you have some idea of my mission in Blue Jacket, and when I tell you that the Good Luck Mine is really the property of Wild Nell, or, properly, Edith Estell, and that you know it to be such, you will understand why I believe you have the girl confined somewhere about your premises."

"Now that Zebender, with whom you have been secretly leagued for many years, is dead, you seek to secure the Estell estate to yourself, and as a means to that end you have secured possession of the girl."

Kenneth Morgan had grown quite pale, but now his face flushed angrily, and he savagely shook his clenched hand at the sport.

"Your story is a trumped-up tissue of falsehoods, so far as I am concerned," he declared, irascibly. "I know nothing about the Estells, and precious little about Solomon Zebender; but I do know that I own the controlling interest in the Good Luck Mining Company, and that I bought it outright from the various stockholders."

"Proceed with your search of my premises, and then get out as quickly as you can. I warn you, too, that you shall yet hear from me."

"Oh, that's all right," assured the Sparkler, coolly. "I stand ready to give you satisfaction at any time in any way you may demand."

"Now, drive ahead, and we'll see what kind of a cage you've got here."

Trembling with rage, the mayor picked up a lamp and led the way through the house.

From attic to cellar, every room was thoroughly searched, and Shasta Sam carefully sounded the walls and the floors.

But no trace of Wild Nell or of any secret closet in which she could be confined was discovered.

Kenneth Morgan assumed a triumphant air.

"I trust that you realize your mistake," he exclaimed, with a malicious smile, as he led the way to the halls.

"Thar's no mistake erbout et!" Old Betty doggedly maintained. "Ye brought ther gal hyar, an' ye've hidden her away. An' ye kin mark my words, Kenneth Morgan, ef harm comes ter her yer life shell pay fer this night's work!"

"Begone!" uttered the mayor, contemptuously, and he flung open the door. "Remember, gentlemen, I shall exact satisfaction from each of you!"

"Well, mayor, you can get it on mighty short notice," the landlord returned, drily, while the Sparkler was content, just then, to answer with a short and vicious nod.

Then the baffled searchers took their departure.

At the point where the footpath entered the trail the three halted and held a brief consultation.

"I am morally certain Nell is somewhere in that house," Shasta Sam declared. "The mayor was extremely nervous during our search."

"Yas, she's thar," averred Old Betty, grimly.

"Unless Morgan's darky has carried her off to some den in the hills," the landlord suggested. "He wasn't to be seen, and we looked the house through."

Shasta Sam shook his head.

"That may be possible, but I feel that Kenneth Morgan has kept her near him," he said. "I am going back."

"Not alone?" the landlord exclaimed.

"Yes; I have an idea that something may be gained by watching the place. If Morgan is as much alarmed as I think he is, he'll attempt to get her away from the house before daybreak."

This view of the matter was at once indorsed by Old Betty, and a moment later she and the landlord started toward her cabin, to have a look at the dead kidnapper, while the Sparkler retraced his steps to Morgan's house.

The sport felt assured that his second trip would not be as fruitless as the first. He had studied the mayor closely while in the house, and knew that his fears had been aroused to the highest pitch.

Quitting the footpath, the Sparkler walked silently through the pines, laying his course to approach the house from the rear.

There was a light in the kitchen, but the heavy oaken shutters over the windows were closed, and he was unable to obtain a view of the interior.

Slowly he continued around the house, listening at each window for some sound which would betray Morgan's movements.

When the circuit had been completed, without result, he silently withdrew to a position in the pines.

"It is to be a case of wait and watch," he muttered, leaning wearily against a tree.

But he was mistaken.

Hardly a minute had elapsed, when hasty steps came up the path, and a dark form approached the door and knocked.

Then the Mayor appeared, and as the light from the open door shone forth Shasta Sam saw that the newcomer was none other than Red Belt, the Sport!

CHAPTER XXII.

ENTRAPPED.

Red Belt quickly crossed the threshold, the door was slammed shut, and darkness again came over the scene.

"Aha! It is as I suspected. The gambler and the mayor are allies in this deal," the Sparkler muttered, and then he cautiously advanced from the pines to the house and tried the door.

It yielded.

Revolver in hand, Shasta Sam noiselessly swung it open and stepped across the threshold. The hallway was dark, but the library door was slightly ajar, and voices came from within.

Stealing forward on tip-toe, the Sparkler paused beside the door, and inclined his head to listen.

Kenneth Morgan was speaking. His tones were sharp and querulous.

"You are an infernal fool. Kent Keene," he was saying. "Common sense should have told you to let that devil alone. Here you are, half blinded, and completely knocked out, right at the time when affairs require your best and keenest energies."

"Well, he did make a monkey of me, and no mistake," admitted the Red Belt Sport, in a tone of disgust. "My judgment was 'way off. He's a much better man than I took him to be."

"But the game's not done yet, Kenneth. Under our agreement we are to fight with rifles at daybreak, and you can gamble that I'll come in with his scalp at my belt."

"Oh, yes, that's very likely," sneered Morgan. "The odds are about a hundred to one that he'll finish you."

A peculiar smile crossed the bruised and discolored face of Red Belt.

"The thing is fixed," he assured, sinking his voice to a whisper. "I entered his room and ruined every cartridge in his layout. Before he discovers why his gun misses fire in the morning, I'll drill two or three holes through him, and then

I reckon his meddling will stop. I am taking no chances."

The mayor shook his head.

"I'll not rest until I see the fellow laid out," he declared. "He just left here with Peter Swift and Old Betty. They were hot on the trail of the girl, and ransacked the house from the garret to cellar."

"You got the girl, then?"

"Yes, but failed with Old Betty. She's a wildcat. She wiped out Bledson in the twinkling of an eye, and trailed me straight home, then went down to camp and blew the job. We've got to get the girl away from here to-night or we'll have a regular nest of hornets around our ears to-morrow."

"Let Eph run her over to the rendezvous," suggested Red Belt. "As soon as I finish up with Shasta Sam in the morning, I'll take a day or two off, and compel her to marry me. Then, with Judge Estell in our power, we can dictate our terms before a single move is made toward dispossessing Zetta Zebender of the estate."

"You will have to see some of the boys and arrange for holding up the Rocky Bar stage," the mayor remarked, lighting a fresh cigar. "Bledso was to attend to it, but I reckon he's turned his last trick. According to Shelby's letter to Old Antelope, the judge should be on the stage, and we can ill afford to let him reach here."

A scowl settled upon Red Belt's disfigured face.

"Confound Shelby!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Fate seems to favor him. We looked for him to come in on horseback; he was compelled to take the stage, on which he'd shipped his baggage, because his horse slipped and broke a leg. So he escaped our net, and got into Blue Jacket. Then, instead of slitting his throat, as we should have done, last night, when we had him fairly in our grip, we spared him to learn his secret—only to have him slip through our fingers!"

"Confound him, I say! In the few hours he's been in camp he's pulled nearly twenty-five thousand dollars from my pockets, and now, when I need money the worst, I find myself nearly broke!"

"Well, if you succeed in shuffling him off in the morning, I'll advance you the amount you need," the mayor remarked. "But I am fully agreed with you that we have made a mighty bad job of it, so far, at least, as he is concerned."

"And there is a chance, too, that he will get onto the trick you worked with the cartridges and procure a fresh supply. If that happens, I wouldn't give a ten-cent piece for your life."

Again Red Belt scowled.

"At the worst, my chance will be as good as his," he retorted, savagely. "Few men excel me in the use of weapons."

"That is true, and I'm open to gamble he's one of the few," was Morgan's rejoinder.

"You are welcome to your opinion."

"Certainly; it is every man's unquestioned privilege to think as he pleases. But if I stood in your shoes I'd make one good, clean stroke to-night, and win both revenge and gold."

"And how, may I ask?"

"I'd go to his room, commit the act while he sleeps, and help myself to his money!"

"And be hanged for it before noon to-morrow!" Red Belt grimly observed. "Under existing circumstances, I'd be the first man suspected!"

"Prove an alibi by myself and Eph. Honeyfang would then have to bear the brunt of suspicion, and as we want to get rid of him it would be yet another bird from the same stone."

The suggestion, infamous as it was, seemed to impress Red Belt most favorably. He pondered a moment, then rose to his feet, saying:

"The idea is good. I'll go at once and see what can be done."

"Have Eph carry the girl over to the rendezvous without fail, for we must take no chances."

"He shall start as soon as he comes in," the mayor agreed. "I sent him out to keep an eye on Old Betty Mosselle, with orders to gather her in if possible."

Meanwhile, the daring spy in the hallway had been eagerly listening to every word of the conversation, and he felt the desperate game of Kenneth Morgan and Red Belt was now fully disclosed.

As the men in the library rose to their feet, Shasta Sam silently retreated to the door.

He had left it slightly ajar on entering. To his intense surprise, he now found it closed and securely locked.

A desperate look crossed his stern, white face. He realized that he was in a trap.

Near at hand was a door opening into an apartment opposite the library. Pushing it open, he slipped quickly into the room and noiselessly closed the door.

At that moment Kenneth Morgan and his visitor stepped from the library into the hall. At the same instant a door at the lower end of the hall was softly opened, and a burly negro appeared.

"Hi, dar! Marse Morgan, dar's a spy in dis house!" he exclaimed, guardedly, as he rapidly moved forward.

"A spy, Eph?" and the mayor started. "You are sure?"

"Da's whut, marse! He sneak in at de front doah; den I lock de doah, an' go roun' an' come in de back way. He am heah, sah, suah!"

"We'll see, Eph. Remain here in the hall, and if he appears, shoot him without fail."

"Come, Keene, we'll search the house," and stepping into the library the mayor secured a lamp, then quickly passed into the room which Shasta Sam had entered the moment before.

But the apartment was now vacant.

The search proceeded. Room after room was visited, and the cellar and attic were explored, but no trace of the spy was to be found.

The doors and windows were all found securely fastened, so that escape by means of them could not have been made.

"Eph has made a mistake," Kenneth Morgan declared at last. "He became frightened at a shadow."

Red Belt shook his head in a dubious way and took his departure.

"Now, Eph, get ready for a quick ride to the den," the mayor continued, turning to the crestfallen negro. "Get out two horses. I want you to take the girl over there."

The negro nodded, and silently quitted the house, while Kenneth Morgan took up the lamp and again descended to the cellar.

The walls and floor of the place were of cemented stone. In one corner was a small heap of debris, such as bits of stone and lumps of mortar, which had evidently been left by the masons.

Beside this heap, plainly exposed to view, was a heavy iron ring, set in the edge of one of the large, flat stone slabs forming the floor.

The mayor frowned darkly as he gazed at this ring.

"How careless!" he exclaimed, biting his nether lip angrily. "Were Pete Swift and Shasta Sam now here they would speedily guess the whereabouts of Wild Nell! This must not happen again."

Then he seized the ring, and with a single powerful pull swung the slab upward and backward.

A narrow flight of steps, leading down into a subcellar, lay revealed, and without a moment's hesitation Kenneth Morgan descended.

There was a lamp in the place, and just as his feet touched the level the mayor started guiltily, and a wild yell of alarm burst from his throat.

Shasta Sam stood before him, cocked revolver in hand!

"Silence!" sternly ordered the Sparkler, deftly clutching Morgan's throat. "Another sound from you and you shall die like the craven hound you are!"

Verily, Kenneth Morgan was fairly entrapped!

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE NET.

Directly behind Shasta Sam, her beautiful face slightly flushed with excitement, stood Wild Nell, and as her bold rescuer seized the mayor by the throat she clapped her hands in glee.

"That is good for the rascal!" she exclaimed, jubilantly. "Give him a thorough shaking for me, but don't kill him just yet, Mr. Shelby."

"Oh, no, Miss Estell; I'll not kill him," the Sparkler returned. "That would be cheating the hangman, and I believe in giving everybody his just due."

"Now, please unbuckle and put on his belt of arms, for I suspect that others of the gang will be here presently, and we would better be fully prepared to meet them."

The girl quickly complied with this request; and then, as Shasta Sam threw his captive to the floor, she brought forward the thongs with which her own shapely wrists and ankles had been confined.

"Turn the tables completely, Mr. Shelby," she requested, her eyes flashing wrathfully. "Here are the ropes he used on me, and they are strong enough to hold an ox. Yes, and here's the gag, too, that kept me from crying aloud when you searched the house. Truss him up securely, Mr. Shelby, and when we leave he can feel what it is to be a prisoner in this foul den."

"That's my idea, exactly," Shasta Sam declared. "We'll not hamper our movements by trying to take him with us, but will leave him here and send back for him."

Then the Sparkler proceeded to bind Kenneth Morgan's hands behind his back. That done he dragged the official to the wall and secured him to one of a number of large iron rings set therein.

"This is evidently the prison-pen of an organized gang," the sport continued, turning to the girl. "Those rings were set in the wall for the identical purpose which Mr. Morgan's present condition illustrates."

"I suspected the existence of some such place when we searched the house, but was not keen enough to discover it. Afterward, I remembered a rubbish heap in a corner of the cellar, and when I had re-entered the house and was compelled to seek a hiding place, I at once descended to the cellar, where under the rubbish I discovered the ring to the trapdoor leading here."

"You will understand now, Kenneth Morgan," turning to that miscreant, "why yourself and Red Belt failed to discover Eph's spy, for during the greater part of your search I was here, releasing Miss Estell."

"Yes, curse you! I understand it all!" snarled the entrapped mayor, his face working with rage. "But I warn you, Samuel Shelby, that the end is not yet!"

Shasta Sam smiled grimly.

"It is approaching very rapidly," he returned, drily. "And now, mayor, open your mouth until I adjust this gag."

Then, despite Morgan's struggles, the gag was applied, and firmly bound in place.

Scarcely had this operation been completed when heavy footsteps were heard in the house above, and then Eph, the negro servant, called down from the head of the cellar stairs:

"Hi, dar, Marse Morgan! I'se ready!"

With a quick gesture to Wild Nell, Shasta Sam moved close to the steps leading up from the subcellar, and, imitating the tones of Kenneth Morgan as nearly as possible, replied:

"All right, Eph, but you'll have to bring down some cold water. The girl has fainted."

Then the negro was heard moving away. Presently he returned, and the next minute his steps sounded upon the cellar stairs.

Patiently the Sparkler waited, clubbed revolver in hand. Eph could be heard groping across the cellar; then his feet came into view on the upper step, and

in another instant he had reached the lower level.

Instantly he divined the real situation. The bucket of water slipped from his hand, and he quickly grasped his knife.

The sport's revolver rose and fell. The heavy butt of the weapon caught the negro on the temple, and fairly lifted him off his feet.

He fell like a log.

There was enough of the rope left to securely bind his hands. Then he was dragged across the stone floor and fastened to one of the rings, beside Kenneth Morgan.

"Like master, like man," quoth the Sparkler, surveying his work with evident satisfaction.

"Now, Miss Estell, let us bid our good friends a glad farewell. It is high time we were getting back to camp."

"Most cheerfully, I assure you, Mr. Shelby," Wild Nell replied, and then, with a last look at the two prisoners, Shasta Sam seized the lamp and followed the girl up the narrow stairway.

In the cellar they stopped long enough to replace the stone slab carefully, and to conceal the iron ring with the heap of rubbish kept there for that purpose, then ascended to the kitchen, and at once started for the Idaho House.

But Wild Nell was destined not to reach the hostelry that night.

Just as they entered the shadows of the pines a half dozen stalwart forms darted out from the trees, and closed in upon the Sparkler and his fair charge. In a trice the girl was torn away, while Shasta Sam, despite his valiant struggles, was borne to earth, bleeding and senseless.

"Quick, fellows! He's done for at last!" the leader cried exultantly. "Skin his pockets, then close up around Old Betty and the girl, and break straight for the rendezvous."

"Bledso, take command, for I remain here."

Quickly the outlaws worked, and at the end of a minute Bledso started up in disgust.

"Curses, cap! We've s'arched ther cuss, an' thar's not a sou ter be found!" he cried.

"Away, then," ordered the chief with an oath. "And remember the Rocky Bar stage!"

Then, like shadows, the outlaws flitted through the pines, while Red Belt, the Sport, drew off his hood-like mask and set his steps toward Kenneth Morgan's house.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MAJOR REAPPEARS.

It will be remembered that on parting from Shasta Sam immediately after that fruitless search of Kenneth Morgan's house, Landlord Swift and Old Betty hastened in the direction of the latter's cabin.

The distance was short, and the trip was made without adventure of any kind; but on entering, both were greatly surprised to find that the body of the outlaw was missing.

A pool of blood marked the spot where he had fallen, but beyond that there was no indication that the struggle had ever occurred.

"I guess he was only winged, Betty, and made good his escape while you were away," Landlord Swift remarked.

"Wal, I don't often waste a shot, but et does look, jest now, es ef ther varlet war able ter walk off with my bullet," admitted Old Betty, with a crestfallen air. "But et wasn't a clean miss, no way."

"Oh, no; you hit him, fast enough, Betty, and I suspect he'll remember you as long as he lives."

"But, come—let us fasten up the cabin and get back to the hotel, for it is there Shasta Sam will meet us when he's done his scouting for the night."

"Ef he on'y finds Nell," the woman muttered, slowly following the landlord outside. "Et's a pity they cain't let ther gal alone."

"It's the money, Betty, that's making the trouble," Swift explained. "I think

matters will all be straightened out in a few hours, for Shasta Sam knows no fear, and he's on the trail to stay."

Then he hastily fastened the cabin door, took Old Betty by the arm, and laid his course straight for the hotel.

A hundred yards had they proceeded thus when they were suddenly startled by a low, deep groan.

It seemed to come from the bottom of a narrow gully close beside the path they were following, and Peter Swift stopped and hastily lighted a match.

"There's some one down there, Betty," he declared. "Stand steady till I see."

"No, I'm cold, an' I'll go on," the woman returned, and she plodded ahead.

Muttering an imprecation at her perverseness, the landlord peered down the bank. Then, just as the match flickered and went out, he disclosed the form of a man lying in a cramped position at the bottom of the gully.

"Hallo! hallo! What's the trouble?" he called.

A groan was the only answer—a groan low and deep and strangely muffled.

Swinging himself over the edge of the bank, Peter Swift cautiously descended to the bottom of the gully, where, revolver in hand, he ignited another match.

He was now within a few feet of the unfortunate wretch, and as he peered forward he saw that he was not only tightly bound, hand and foot, but gagged as well.

Then, too, he recognized the man.

It was Major Marker!

"Well, by Christopher Columbus!" the landlord ejaculated, hurriedly scrambling forward. "I'll swear, major, you're in the deuce of a fix!"

Another groan was the only response.

As quickly as possible, Swift removed the gag, severed the thongs, and helped the veteran to his feet.

Needless to say, Marker was in a bad way. He was speechless, and so stiff that it was with the utmost difficulty that he could move hand or foot.

"We'll have to go slow, old man, till you've thawed out," the landlord observed, when he discovered the veteran's condition. "Those ropes have pretty near stopped circulation, and you're half frozen."

Then he patiently helped the veteran along until they found a point in the bank sufficiently broken to permit of their reaching the level, after which his task proved much easier.

But at best their progress was painfully slow, and it was not until a full half hour had elapsed that they gained the shelter of the hotel.

The barroom was deserted, and the man in charge was peacefully dozing on a chair behind the bar when they entered, but at once sprang up, thoroughly awake and ready for business, on their nearer approach.

Under his skillful ministrations, the major soon "thawed out," and then he told his story.

"I'd gone out fer Shasta Sam, ter hunt up ther layout o' Wild Nell an' Old Betty," he explained, speaking slowly and painfully. "I heer'd thet Pious Pete hed bin taken with a fit o' goodness an' given up his cabin ter them, an' I went up thar ter find ef et war so."

"An' I'm blamed ef 'twasn't! Et's a puffedly safe bet thet I was a heap-sight surprised, but I jest fixed up my business an' started back ter camp. Long thar by ther gully a gang jumped me, tarned my pockets wrong side out, an' left me jest as ye found me, Peter."

"Et's a mighty pecooliar sarcumstance, taken all 'round; an' ef ye hedn't happened 'long jest es ye did, I reckon I'd a-petered out, right thar!"

"Oh, yes; I haven't a doubt that you would have been dead by morning," the landlord remarked. "And I assure you I'm mighty glad I got there when I did."

Then he turned to the bartender and asked about Old Betty.

The woman had not appeared.

This fact alarmed Peter Swift. He felt

that some harm had befallen Old Betty, and he at once drew Major Marker aside and with him carefully went over the events of the night.

When this brief conference was ended the veteran quickly reached a conclusion.

"Thar's a gang in this hyar camp, an' Mayor Morgan an' Red Belt aire et ther head of et," he asserted, his round, red face beginning to glow from his liberal potatoes. "I've hed my eyes on Morgan fer some time, an' thar's a heap-sight more mystery about him than thar should be fer a man on ther level."

"They've bin makin' a play ter git Wild Nell an' Old Betty in their hands, an' I reckon they're gone an' done et."

"Oh, yes," the landlord agreed. "There's a gang, sure enough; they've got the girl, we know, and it's pretty certain they've got the woman, too."

"The question is, what are we going to do about it?"

The major reflected a moment.

"I don't see thet we kin do anything before day," he declared, slowly stroking his smooth, round face. "I'm so completely knocked up thet I won't be able ter move fer three or four hours, an' I reckon you're in about ther same boat."

"So I moves thet we stretches out on these hyar tables an' takes a cat-nap. Shasta Sam is on guard at Morgan's house, an' when he locates ther game he'll find us ready ter lend a hand."

This view of the case met with the landlord's approval, and a moment later both men were seeking much needed rest.

Just at daybreak the door of the Idaho House bar was weakly pushed open, and Shasta Sam staggered blindly across the threshold.

His black eyes were gleaming fiercely, but his face was pale and bloody, his clothing torn and disheveled.

The bartender sprang up; then, as he recognized the sport, from his lips burst the words:

"Great heavens! Mr. Shelby, you are hurt—badly hurt!"

"Easy now, and I will help you!"

And vaulting lightly across the bar, the man quickly advanced to the Sparkler's side, and conducted him to a chair.

The commotion had roused the landlord and Major Marker, and both came forward, sleepily rubbing their eyes.

At sight of Shasta Sam, however, they shook off the drowsiness which benumbed their faculties, and briskly set to work.

The Sparkler seemed badly hurt. He had been beaten over the head with some blunt instrument, and the wounds thus inflicted had bled quite freely. There were a number of bullet holes and knife thrusts in his coat and vest, but, thanks to the shirt of mail, no damage had been inflicted by lead or steel.

Landlord Swift was something of a surgeon, and he set deftly to work upon his guest, washing off the clotted blood and cleansing and dressing the wounds.

"There's no great damage done," he announced, after a few minutes. "These cuts on the head are merely scalp wounds, and will heal rapidly, while there seems to be no other wound of any description upon him."

"He has been assaulted, knocked senseless, and left for dead, but revived and dragged himself here. He has lain on the ground until cold and stiff, and that, I think, accounts for his stupor."

Shasta Sam, who had now partially revived, nodded assent to the landlord's proposition. Under the powerful stimulation of spirits he was rapidly improving.

Then, as the rigidity of his jaws relaxed, he explained just what had happened.

"Those devils have made a clean sweep at last," he declared, in conclusion, his face again betraying its wonted energy and resolution. "And the worst of it is, we can't prove a thing against them!"

"Let me have a good, hot breakfast as

soon as possible, landlord, and then I'll meet Red Belt. Now that the war is fairly on, it shall be one of extermination!"

In vain Landlord Swift and the major advised a postponement of the duel, urging his condition as a valid reason for demanding an extension of time.

Shasta Sam's black eyes flashed wrathfully.

"Red Belt has sought the fight, he is responsible for my condition, and it is now his life or mine," he declared, in a hard, cold voice. "When the boasting braggart toes the mark he'll find me there and ready!"

CHAPTER XXV.

FACE TO FACE.

Ere the first flush of the rising sun had stained the highest peak of the surrounding hills, Shasta Sam stepped out into Blue Jacket's streets, repeating rifle in hand.

To the casual observer the Sparkler would have looked little, if any, the worse for his trying experiences of the past six-and-thirty hours. His jaunty slouched hat and flowing hair concealed those ugly wounds upon his head, and he strode along with the quick, free step of an athlete in perfect fettle.

Major Marker gazed after him admiringly.

"Thar's clean game, Pete Swift!" he declared, touching the landlord's arm. "Sam Shelby may be killed, but he can't be whipped!"

"Right you are, major," heartily agreed the boniface. "I'm bettin', too, that he wins the skirmish."

Then, at a point about two hundred and fifty yards down the street, Shasta Sam halted and patiently waited, rifle in hand.

When Red Belt reached Kenneth Morgan's cottage, immediately after that fierce and successful assault upon the Sparkler in the shadows of the pines, he found the front door locked.

That there had been trouble in the house, the gambler felt assured, and without wasting time in knocking he hurried around to the kitchen door, which he found ajar.

The room was in darkness, but at the threshold Red Belt ignited a match and glanced around, then coolly lighted the lamp and fastened the door.

"It's queer what has become of Morgan and the nigger," he muttered, as he took up the lamp. "I am willing to admit that Shasta Sam was a mighty dangerous man, but I don't believe that he got away with both of them, and that, too, without using his gun."

Then the gambler hastily searched the house.

Needless to say, there was nowhere a sign of a struggle.

Mystified, Red Belt next entered the cellar. There he flashed the rays of the lamp about, but beyond a number of boxes and barrels containing vegetables and other stores, nothing met his gaze save the blank, bare walls.

He knew nothing of the subcellar, although he had reasons for suspecting its existence. Kenneth Morgan was an extremely close-mouthed man, and there were a number of peculiar features about the cottage which were known to no one save himself and the negro, Eph.

So, when the keen-witted gambler noticed the little heap of broken stones and dried mortar, his suspicions were instantly aroused.

"That stuff was evidently left by the mason when he built these walls," he muttered. "It is strange that one so neat and precise in everything as Kenneth Morgan is should permit it to remain here so long."

And with that he scattered the heap with his foot, disclosing the iron ring.

The next minute he had thrown open the secret door, and was descending the flight of rude steps into the subcellar, lamp in hand.

Then a sharp cry of astonishment came from the gambler.

Kenneth Morgan and the negro Eph

were there, lashed firmly to the rings in the wall, just as the Sparkler and Wild Nell had left them.

Beyond that single cry, no sound escaped Red Belt's grimly compressed lips. He realized just then more clearly than ever, the superb courage and daring of Shasta Sam.

Putting down the lamp, he drew his knife and quickly released the prisoners. The negro was still unconscious, but a dash or two of water from the bucket brought him gasping to his feet.

Kenneth Morgan, stroking his long beard in suppressed rage, hurriedly explained how both himself and Eph had been entrapped by the Sparkler, and Wild Nell rescued.

"I reckon there's nothing left for us but to break for the hills at once," he concluded, in a sullen, almost hopeless voice. "That devil will be here with a posse, presently, and if they find us we're good for the rope."

"They won't come!" was Red Belt's abrupt but smiling rejoinder. "Both the girl and Old Betty are now safely in our hands and on their way to the den, while Shasta Sam—well, his carcass is so full of bullet holes that I doubt if there is a drop of blood left in him!"

Utterly bewildered, the mayor stared at the gambler.

"You can't mean that!" he gasped, unwilling to credit his ears. "Shasta Sam dead! Say that again, Kent Keene!"

"Yes, dead!" the gambler affirmed, and then he rapidly told of the encounter in the pines.

Like one in a dream, Kenneth Morgan listened, then clapped his hands in ghoulish glee.

Leaving Eph to remove from the subcellar all evidence of the use to which it had so recently been put, the mayor and the gambler ascended to the library, where further explanations were made.

It seemed that on leaving Morgan's cottage, immediately after that bootless search for the spy, Red Belt had proceeded direct to the Idaho House, to assault Shasta Sam, in accordance with the plan agreed up; but the Sparkler was absent from his room, and, with his fears freshly aroused, the gambler decided at once to return to Kenneth Morgan, to put him on his guard.

In the barroom of the hotel Red Belt encountered the outlaw, Bledso, who had shortly before been shot down and left for dead by Old Betty. The fellow was suffering from an ugly-looking scalp wound, but was yet able to do duty, and at the gambler's suggestion he promptly rallied a number of the Red Raiders.

The party had scarcely started toward Kenneth Morgan's house when Old Betty stepped fairly among them, and was recognized, seized, and hurried away, until the party could procure horses.

Nearly an hour had elapsed between the capture of Old Betty and the encounter with Shasta Sam and Wild Nell in the pines, and thus it happened that Landlord Swift and Major Marker, snugly ensconced in the barroom of the Idaho House, failed to hear the firing, which would have warned them of the Sparkler's danger.

Kenneth Morgan listened most attentively. He found it hard to realize the full import of this eccentric turn of fortune's wheel.

"We must get rid of that body," he declared, after a moment's thought. "We'll send Eph out, and let him carry it down to the lower end of the camp, to be found there, so that it will not so plainly appear that we were connected with the Sparkler's sudden taking off."

"Just before day will do," Red Belt observed. "It is seldom that any one is astir in camp at that hour, and the chances of Eph's escaping detection will be much greater."

"Then, promptly at sunrise I'll go down to the hotel, fully prepared for the duel, just as if I really believed it was going to occur."

The mayor nodded approval.

"Yes, that will be a good, strong bluff," he declared. "I will go with you,

just as if I were going to act as your second."

Then the plotters chuckled at their cunning, and the gambler threw himself upon a couch for a short sleep, while Morgan descended to the cellar to give Eph his instructions.

Shortly after daybreak both men arose and prepared to go down to camp. Eph was asleep, so breakfast was out of question. Red Belt contented himself with a glass of liquor, while the mayor lighted a strong cigar, and both men left the house and started down the slope.

Red Belt had secured Morgan's rifle, a fine repeater, and as he strode boldly down the hill the mayor silently chuckled.

"I wonder if it wouldn't be different, if he didn't know Shelby was cold in death?" he mused.

Kenneth Morgan had always secretly entertained a poor opinion of the gambler's courage.

Red Belt, wholly unconscious of his associate's thoughts, led the way until the path opened into the trail, and then the two men advanced side by side.

They had proceeded thus for perhaps fifty yards, when they came to a point from which the street of the camp was visible.

Then they noticed that on each side of the street, sheltered by doorways and the corners of buildings there were numerous small knots of men—all waiting, watching, eagerly talking!

And at that juncture a mighty shout went up, and half a hundred hands pointed to them.

Red Belt, the Sport, suddenly grew pale and stopped in his tracks.

"Great heavens!" he ejaculated, quivering with fear. "Look yonder!—down the street! It is Shasta Sam—and alive!"

Kenneth Morgan's eyes followed the direction of the pointing finger. There, true enough, gun in hand, grimly and patiently waiting the coming of his foe, stood the Sparkler!

"Another bungle of it, Kent Keene, by heavens!" he cried, in a low, sharp voice.

"Brace up, you fool! Do you want all Blue Jacket to see that your nerve is shaken?"

Rallying quickly from that sudden access of terror, the gambler again strode forward, but in utter silence, until checked by the mayor's restraining hand.

"Wait here until I return, and keep your eyes open," Kenneth Morgan ordered, curtly.

Then the mayor strode rapidly toward the Idaho House.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DUEL.

A cold smile curled Shasta Sam's firm lips as that wild shout from the miners heralded the approach of Red Belt, the Sport.

Some three minutes had elapsed since the Sparkler had taken up his position near the lower end of the rough street, and this time he had employed in carefully considering the mode of attack he should adopt.

Then, as that shout died away, he noted the gambler's palpable hesitation, and his black eyes gleamed brightly.

"It is just as I anticipated!" he muttered. "My appearance here, ready for battle, has struck terror to his guilty soul!"

"He believed me dead, or so badly wounded that I could not stand, and so had no fear that I would meet him!"

"But I am here, ready and waiting! And the end is not yet, for when my rifle speaks he will know that I have discovered and foiled his dastardly plot to rob me of life without danger to himself, in this duel, and his cowardly heart will quake with fear!"

At that juncture the Red Belt Sport halted, while his companion, Kenneth Morgan, walked briskly onward, directing his steps toward the group in front of the Idaho House.

"Good morning, gentlemen," the mayor saluted, with a melancholy smile. "I

suppose that some one of you is here to represent Mr. Shelby in this unfortunate and ill-advised affair?"

"Oh, yas, mayor! I'm yer h'r-pin," Major Marker promptly responded. "Thet is, ef ye mean this hyar shootin' bee."

"This duel is what I mean. I have the honor to represent Red Belt, and I tell you frankly that I have been trying to get him to agree to a compromise."

"Wal, nary compromise goes with my man," the veteran promptly declared. "He's hyar fer business an' nothin' else."

"So be it, then. He is a stranger in camp, but seems to be a bold, manly fellow, and I dislike to see him come to grief—as he surely will if this duel proceeds, for Red Belt is a dead shot and merciless as the grave."

"Rats, mayor—thet's all rot! Yer man is shakin' in his boots right now, an' I reckon ye know et, too," and the major laughed outright. "Et's dollars ter dimes, ef ye want ter bet, thet Shasta Sam wings him, first shot!"

Kenneth Morgan scowled.

"I never gamble," he retorted, acridly. "If you fellows are determined to go ahead, let's fix the conditions of the fight, and may the best man win."

"Thet's right, mayor—puffectly correct!" the veteran responded calmly.

"The distance was ter be five hundred yards, an' es nigh es I kin get at et, they're about that now."

"You go ter your man an' I'll go ter mine. Then ther landlord hyar shell fire a shot from his revolver, an' thet'll be ther signal fer ther boys ter sail in."

"What say? Is thet fa'r?"

"Oh, yes; that will give the men an equal chance, I presume. At any rate, I have no suggestions to offer."

Then the mayor turned and in a dignified way walked back to the Red Belt Sport, while Major Marker hastened in the opposite direction.

The veteran was the first to reach his principal.

"It's all right, Sammy!" he exclaimed, with a broad grin, as he seized and shook the Sparkler's hand. "Thet Red Belt galoot is scared nigh out o' his boots, an' ther mayor war arter a compromise—wich same he didn't get!"

"There can be no compromise," Shasta Sam declared, briefly.

Then a warning shout from Peter Swift announced that Morgan had reached his principal, and the mayor at once withdrew to the roadside, as far out of harm's way as possible—an example which was quickly followed by Red Belt's second.

Then, with a second warning shout, the landlord raised his revolver and fired in the air.

Both duelists had promptly fallen into position, and following closely upon the report of the pistol came the heavier notes of the two rifles.

Shasta Sam's hat was knocked from his head by his adversary's bullet.

But Red Belt fared worse.

Dropping his rifle, he was seen to throw up his hands and sink in a heap on the frozen earth.

The ball from the Sparkler's rifle had sped true, and the duel was ended.

While Kenneth Morgan hastily organized a posse to carry the wounded gambler to his cottage, Shasta Sam, with Major Marker, coolly walked up the street to the Idaho House, where he was given a genuine ovation.

In a half-lawless mining camp nothing wins like luck and pluck, and in the short time he had been in Blue Jacket the Sparkler had demonstrated that he was richly endowed with both.

But there was work yet to be done before the sun should go down on that day—sharp, desperate, and dangerous work, and Shasta Sam was forced fairly to tear himself away from his admirers, and, with Major Marker and Peter Swift, seek the seclusion of his apartment.

Once there, safe from intrusion, Samuel Shelby took these tried and trusted friends fully into his confidence, and

mapped out the work he wished accomplished during the next five hours—the time he had set aside for the absolute rest of which he stood in such sore need.

Zetta Zebender had rallied but slowly from Giles Honeyfang's murderous assault, despite the untiring efforts of the landlord's wife and Dr. Jeremiah Samuels.

The nervous shock had been great. That deathly pallor of face and hands continued, and her eyes held a wild, terrified look.

"Thar's somethin' back o' this," mumbled Dr. Samuels, to Mrs. Swift, with a peculiar look in his bloodshot brown eyes as he covertly watched his patient.

"Thar war somethin' queer in ther ol' man's takin' off, too, an' I done reckon ther trouble, right now, is up hyar," and he laid his finger against his forehead.

"You don't think, doctor—"

"Sh! Et will pass away, by an' by, an' et's no need ter let on we've noticed et. You jest watch her, an' let no one see her. An' I reckon a right smart dose o' good liquor won't hert her none. Ef she gets bad, sen' Pete over, an' I'll come back."

Then the doctor took his departure, leaving the matron in a flutter of excitement.

This conversation occurred about the middle of the forenoon. Promptly at twelve o'clock Zetta sat up on her couch and gazed keenly at Mrs. Swift.

"Did you send my message to Mr. Shelby?" she asked, calmly.

The matron nodded affirmatively.

"He stopped at your door a half hour ago, and asked about you," she added.

"Why did you not admit him?" and Zetta spoke sharply.

"The doctor ordered that no one should see you just yet."

Then, for the first time in hours, a vivid dash of color came into Zetta Zebender's face, and her black eyes snapped angrily.

"The dolt! The besotted fool!" she cried, springing up from the couch. "His presumption is equalled only by his ignorance!"

"I must see Mr. Shelby at once!"

The matron rose.

"Calm yourself, Zetta!" she requested, both voice and appearance betraying trepidation. "Mr. Shelby has gone out of Blue Jacket and may not return for several days."

In sheer disappointment Zetta sank back upon the couch.

"Gone, and for several days," she repeated, in a dazed way. Then she sat for several minutes, restlessly tapping the bare floor with her foot. Looking up at length, she abruptly asked:

"Doesn't the Rocky Bar stage come through Blue Jacket to-day?"

"It does, Zetta," the matron replied.

"Very good! Now, Mrs. Swift, bring me some writing materials at once. I shall go away on the stage to-day, but will leave a letter and a parcel in your hands for delivery to Mr. Shelby."

The landlady demurred; but Zetta Zebender was obstinate, and carried her point. In due course, paper, pens, and ink were placed before her, and then the strange girl set at her self-appointed task.

CHAPTER XXVII.

GILES IN TROUBLE.

Let us now, for a brief while, follow the movements of Giles Honeyfang.

His headlong flight through the window of the Idaho House parlor to the roof of the veranda, and thence to the ground, as heretofore described, had been accomplished without especial damage to himself, aside from numerous slight cuts and bruises, and, under cover of the night he darted away at breakneck speed.

The ruffian had at last learned to hold Shasta Sam in wholesome fear, and his only thought, at that moment, was to get beyond the Sparkler's reach.

He knew that the surrounding mountains were fairly honeycombed with caves and canyons, in which one could live for months or years undetected, could a base of supplies be established, and his first thought was to leave the camp far behind him.

But when the sounds of pursuit grew fainter and fainter, his coolness and nerve began to return, and he finally stopped, a short distance below Blue Jacket, to think over the matter.

"I reckon I've got my foot inter et, fast enough, this hyar time," he soliloquized, as he gazed back at the twinkling lights of the camp. "I reckon ther deal between me an' this fortune is clean bu'sted, too, an' no mistake—even ef ther gal ain't dead!"

"So I've got ter lay low till I see ther drift; fer ef she did croak, I'm jest nach-erly sure ter letch my fit o' sickness at a rope's end!"

"An' I dasn't go up in ther hills, fer et's nary a bite ter eat nor a sup ter drink I've got."

"Cuss ther luck! Ef I'd not quarreled with Paddy McGovern I'd be fixed now, fer ther Irishman would hide me away till this thing blew over or I got a first-class chance ter skip!"

Then Honeyfang crouched down behind a boulder and, with his chin in his hands, thought long and deeply.

He knew that he had considerably more than a hundred dollars in his pockets, and it had occurred to him that he might be able to buy back Paddy McGovern's good will.

"I'll try et," he decided, at length. "At ther wu'st, I'll on'y hev ter run."

Rising from behind the huge rock, the ruffian turned and walked back to camp.

As he drew near Paddy's Glory, he slackened his pace and advanced with great caution until he could peer through the window.

It chanced that McGovern was alone in the place. The stirring times in and around the Idaho House had drawn his patrons away, and the Irishman was sitting on a box before the stove, nursing his battered face and bitterly lamenting his luck.

Giles Honeyfang realized that his opportunity was at hand.

Pushing open the door, he boldly entered, and stepped directly between Paddy McGovern and the bar.

The Irishman looked up. The expression that came over his face was simply indescribable. His mouth opened, and his eyes bulged with strangely mingled rage, chagrin, astonishment, and admiration as he deliberately surveyed Honeyfang from head to heels.

"Phw'at dhe divil!" he blankly ejaculated.

Giles Honeyfang smiled blandly.

"Ain't I a burd?" he demanded, with complacent air, as he struck an attitude.

"I just come in, Paddy, ter tell ye I'm dead sorry I struck ye. Every word ye told me was so!"

"Will ye take a drink with me?"

"Yis, yis," the Irishman briskly assented, averting his face as he rose to conceal a crafty smile. "Sure, et's dhe foine-lookin' gintilmin yez hev made o' yerself, Misther Honeyfang!"

And he walked around behind the rude bar, and set out a bottle and glasses.

Then the two men drank, and Honeyfang, with his elbows upon the bar, briefly outlined his predicament, while McGovern listened closely, even gravely.

"Indade, an' dhis is a bad box yez foind yerself in, me fri'nd!" he observed, when the ruffian had concluded. "If Zetta Zebender dies, it's dhe rope I'm thinkin' yez'll git!"

"I reckon thet'll be et," Honeyfang admitted, glancing nervously toward the door. "But ye kin help me, Paddy, fer I know thet ye kin hide me till this thing blows over."

"An' I'm not askin' ye ter do et fer nothin', either, fer, good friends es we aire, et wouldn't be right. I've got ther money ter make ther thing square. See?"

And with that the fugitive ruffian dropped a roll of bills upon the bar.

Paddy McGovern eyed the money covetously. One of keener discernment than Giles Honeyfang would, perhaps, have read his expression aright.

"Oi don't jist know about dhis t'ing," he remarked, doubtfully. "Dhe place is all roight, but Oi dunno about dhe hoidin'."

"Yis, begorra! Yez kin hev dhe hoidin', too!"

Warned at last by that sudden change in the Irishman's voice, Honeyfang leaped back from the bar. But the precaution was taken too late.

The end of a heavy bludgeon McGovern had slyly drawn from under the bar fell squarely upon the ruffian's thick skull, knocking him down.

"B'at me face, wull yez, yez omadhoun!" the Irishman yelled, dancing out into the floor. "I'll t'ach yez a thrick, bedad, dhat'll make yez oys wather!"

And then, throwing aside the club, McGovern fell upon the prostrate but still conscious rough, and, with his fists, beat him to his heart's content, and ended up by throwing Honeyfang out into the street.

It was some minutes before the bruised and battered ruffian could collect his senses sufficiently to understand just what had befallen him. Then he jammed his hat over his eyes, and with his hands in his pockets skulked aimlessly through the street.

As chance would have it, he encountered no one, and so passed on beyond the camp, and out upon the Rocky Bar trail.

"Ther jig's up, back thar," he muttered, disconsolately. "I've not a friend left, an' I kin never go back."

Then he plodded slowly onward, grumbling to himself, but driven into continuous action by the keen night air.

The trail was rough and the night dark, and as hour after hour went by in almost aimless wandering, he gradually fell away from the road and daybreak found him lost in the wilds.

Utterly bewildered, Giles Honeyfang gazed around in a hopelss way, then drew a short, hard breath.

Directly before him lay a deep and impassable canyon, while on nearly every side giant rocks reared their snow-clad heads.

Patches of snow lay here and there on the broken height, and the ruffian had determined to retrace his steps to the road by his trail through them, when he was startled by a scrambling sound and a peculiar snort near at hand.

Wheeling quickly, he found himself within a dozen paces of a huge grizzly, which, hunger-driven, was advancing directly upon him.

That he was in deadly danger the ruffian knew full well; but he coolly drew his heavy revolvers, and sent shot after shot into the maddened brute.

Steadily, rapidly, the bear advanced. Then, in shifting aside, Honeyfang slipped and fell, and as he came up the paws of the monster closed around him.

A yell—a shot—a roar of pain, then both man and beast whirled over the canyon verge!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HOLD-UP.

Ribbon Rob, the driver, was in high feather. The day was bright and clear, the air sharp and bracing, and his four good horses were spinning along in splendid style, despite the roughness of the trail.

Half the distance between Rocky Bar and Blue Jacket had been covered, and Rob was congratulating himself that the most dangerous part of his run lay behind him.

"Et's not often thar's a hold-up on this hyar part o' ther run," he explained to his "outsider," a short, stockily built old gentleman, with white mutton-chop whiskers and keen, cold, blue eyes. "Thar's on'y bin three in ther last two y'ars, an' all o' them happened at ther place I p'inted out, back yen."

"But they do say thar's a new gang on this hyar trail now, ready fer biz, an' f'm reports they must be reg'lar hummers."

"Ther 'Red Raiders,' they calls themselves, an' ther chiefs han'le is Dick Dread."

"They've plucked a few lone pilgrims, but hev'n't bothered me yet, an' I do hopes they'll fergit me entire."

"I can join you most heartily in that hope, so far, at least, as the present trip is concerned," the passenger averred, his keen blue eyes busy with the trail ahead.

"I confess that I have very little curiosity concerning these road-agents, and no desire whatever to see them."

Ribbon Rob chuckled.

"I c'u'd almost wish et t'other way, jedge," he observed, cheerily cracking his long whip above the ears of the leaders. "I've most ginerally noticed 'et et's them es don't want ter see 'em 'at's shore ter meet up with 'em, while them es do want ter see 'em diskiver et's blamed hard ter find 'em."

"Now, fer a mortal fact—"

The jehu ended abruptly and, with hand on rail, leaned far out to the side, to scan suspiciously a series of tell-tale marks in the patches of snow bordering the trail.

"A goin' an' a comin'!" he muttered, sending a sharp look down the long slope. "Ther critter never doubled on himself, onless— Yas et war a spy! Thar's trouble, shore!"

"Trouble?" echoed the judge, catching that cautious utterance. "Road-agents?"

"Nothin' less, or I misses my guess."

"Ye'd better git down, jedge, an' git inside, fer ther cusses aire awful keerless with their shootin' irons, an' I reckon ye'd never keer ter ketch a stray out-croppin' o' lead, eh?"

The passenger frowned.

"Ill not run yet," he declared, grimly.

"Wal, hev yer way, but don't be reckless with them thar popguns. Et may be a false alarm. Dead Man's Canyon is jest ahead yender, et thet p'int o' rocks, an' we'll soon know. Ef thar's any chainece ter stand them off, I'll see. Don't ye draw tell I do, fer et'd mean a last fit o' sickness fer all two of us."

"You'd never—"

"Wal, say et, pardner!" and Ribbon Rob looked quizzically at his passenger, waiting to hear the rest of that explosive outburst. "I'd never—which, or what, pardner?"

"You'd never let the devils rob you without a fight for it, would you, Ribbon Rob?" the judge demanded, in a calmer tone, while his keen old eyes sharply scanned the driver's weather-browned face.

Rob slowly shook his head.

"Not ef a chainece offered—shorely not!" he returned, coolly. "An' then—et would 'pend on sarcumstances."

Then he warned the judge to keep quiet, for the canyon was now near at hand, and gave his whole attention to the driving, in apparent unconcern.

The leaders were abreast of those frowning jaws, and Ribbon Rob was fairly holding his breath in suspense and uncertainty, when forth from sheltering rocks and bushes sprang an even half dozen men, all masked and armed.

A rifle cracked, then another, and the leaders went down, pulling the wheelers with them, and bringing the stage up with a jar and a jolt.

"Hold hard, Ribbon Rob, and do not draw, for you are covered!" the road-agent chief ordered, in sharp tones.

"So I sees, pard, an' I do reckon ye're shorely slingin' us the truth," the driver responded, as he held the frantic wheelers, now scrambling to their feet, in check.

"But, lordy! pard, ye're new ones on me, fer I thought ther sheriff f'm Rocky Bar hed hanged ye all."

"The sheriff from Rocky Bar will never hang Dick Dread or the Red Raiders," the outlaw boasted, flourishing his revolver in a defiant way.

"So—ho! An' ye're Dick Dread?"

"No; the chief is not here."

"But button your lip, Ribbon Rob, and help down your tenderfoot friend, for the Red Raiders spare neither age nor beauty."

Then the judge, white with rage, rose from his seat.

"I may be old, I may be a tenderfoot, but as sure's my name is Ichabad Estell, I'm not so old nor so verdant that I can't and won't make you scoundrels sweat for this infernal outrage!" he declared, savagely, and then he swung himself slowly from the seat to the ground.

Meanwhile two of the outlaws had advanced to the stage door, and at the point of their revolvers compelled the two other passengers to alight.

Then the three were placed in a row and quickly plundered of their weapons, valuables, and money, after which the freight on the stage received the attention of the road-agents.

That they were old hands at the business, Ribbon Rob, who watched their operations with a critical eye, was loath to believe.

"Et's a gang o' consarned camp bums out fer a stake," he decided.

Then, when the robbery had been completed, the two passengers were ordered to resume their places in the coach, but the judge was detained.

"I reckon, judge, you'll have to go with us and tarry awhile," the leader announced. "You're too almighty pert for an old rooster, and it would be just like you to kick up a tremendous row about this little hold-up if we let you slip through."

"If appearances go for anything, we ought to be able to realize pretty heavily on you in ransom money, too."

Then Judge Estell raved and stormed, threatened and pleaded, but all to no avail, for the leader was obdurate.

"Bind his hands, boys, and tie him on a horse, for he goes with us," he ordered.

Ribbon Rob attempted to remonstrate, but was curtly told to attend to his own business, and he quietly obeyed.

It required but a very few minutes for the road-agents to complete their work. Then they retreated into the mouth of Dead Man's Canyon, mounted their horses, and rode away, with Judge Estell in their midst.

As soon as the Red Raiders had disappeared, Ribbon Rob leaped to the ground and began to clear away the wreckage caused by killing the leaders.

In this task he was willingly assisted by the two passengers, and in little less than an hour the coach was again in motion, but at greatly reduced speed.

Ribbon Rob was inwardly fuming and railing at his ill luck, when, rounding a sharp curve in the trail, he came in sight of a company of eight horsemen, all heavily armed, and each leading a lightly laden pack animal.

A number of these men he quickly recognized, and a yell of joy pealed from his lips.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE PURSUIT.

"Ho! Shasta Sam, yer makes my eyes water!—yer shorely does!" Ribbon Rob sang out, promptly drawing rein. "Yer outfit looks like fight, an' ef they're spilin' fer et thar's fine game jest ahead!"

"You have been held up, Rob?" the Sparkler enquired.

"Oh, yas, Pard Sam—back thar et Dead Man's Canyon."

"Ther Red Raiders jumped us, shot my leaders, stripped ther hearse, an' then carried away one o' my passingers, ter hold fer ransom, they said."

"And that passenger, Ribbon Rob, was Judge Estell?"

"Lordy! Pard Sam, yer must shorely be a min' reader, or hev' sperits an' spooks ter tell yer things," the driver responded, in amazement. "Judge Estell war ther identical galoot!"

"He war sassy, the jedge war. He rid up hyar with me, an' wanted ter fight."

"But thar war six o' the Red Raiders in sight, an' more in ther rocks. Seein' ther risk war too big fer ther ante, I passed, an' advised ther jedge ter shorely do likewise.

"An' he did, too, but he shot off his mouth, an' ther agents toted him off inter Dead Man's Canyon."

Then Shasta Sam thanked Ribbon Rob for the information, and the little cavalcade swung off to the side of the trail, to permit the coach to pass.

"You galoots ain't sayin' much, but I jest nacherly wishes yer luck," the driver called back, as his stage swept by, to disappear around another angle in the winding trail.

Then Shasta Sam turned to his followers.

"We're just in time, pards, to strike the trail fresh and run it right to the den," he declared, with stern face and flashing eyes. "Elated at their success and anticipating no pursuit before tomorrow, the Red Raiders will doubtless neglect their usual precautions and leave sign enough to make the round-up quick and sure.

"But we must strike quick and hard, for daylight to-morrow will find them on the move."

"Et's a puffectly safe bet ye've called ther turn," Major Marker assented, nodding his head sagaciously. "Now that they've got things jest as they want 'em, they'll scatter, or skip."

This view of the case met with the approval of Peter Swift and the five picked men from Blue Jacket whom the landlord had gotten together at Shasta Sam's request, and the Sparkler and his "army" at once pushed on toward Dead Man's Canyon as rapidly as possible.

Arrived at the scene of the hold-up, they found evidence to sustain Ribbon Rob's report, for the dead horses were there, while the patches of snow beside the trail had been cut and trampled by many feet.

Pausing only long enough to determine that the Red Raiders had really retreated through Dead Man's Canyon, the Sparkler divided his force, detailing Landlord Swift and one of the men from Blue Jacket to bring up the rear with the pack animals; then, with five men at his back, he boldly pushed into the canyon.

The pace set was a rapid one, for the afternoon was well advanced, and it was the sport's desire to shorten the distance between himself and the Red Raiders as much as possible, without actually overtaking them, by nightfall.

For upward of two hours the chase continued without a pause. Then, just as the sombre gloom of the canyon began to deepen with the shades of approaching night, the leaders of the party drew rein and dismounted.

Before them was an intersecting canyon, doubling back through the mountains at a sharp angle, and the Sparkler felt assured that the Red Raiders had here swerved aside from the main defile, to ascend to their stronghold.

A brief but careful investigation sustained this belief, and leaving one of the men to act as a guide for the two with the pack animals, Shasta Sam mounted and again moved forward, this time slowly and cautiously, to note each break and niche in the walls.

But the defile abruptly opened into a small hill-girdled basin, about two miles above Dead Man's Canyon, and the pursuit, in force, seemed at an end for the night.

Dismounting, Shasta Sam and the major retraced their steps a short distance and sought a sheltered camping place.

Both were confident that the Red Raiders' rendezvous was near at hand, and it was determined to use every precaution to keep the pursuit secret.

Accordingly, the camp-fires were built nearly a mile down the canyon, behind an angle in the wall, and there the party, with the exception of the Sparkler and the major, prepared to remain until day-break, if not earlier called into action.

Supper was prepared and eaten; and then, while the men adjusted their traps,

Shasta Sam and the veteran silently returned to the basin.

The Sparkler, fortunately, was equipped with a dark lantern, and both men believed that by a cautious use of it the rendezvous might be located, and that too, without alarming the Red Raiders.

The trail, they quickly discovered, cut directly across the basin and entered a continuation of the canyon through a break in the opposite wall.

That fact ascertained, the trail was easy to follow, for each man took a side of the canyon, and plodded slowly onward, fairly feeling his way in the intense gloom.

They had proceeded thus for a half hour, when Shasta Sam came suddenly upon the mouth of a canyon even larger than the one they were in.

But the sharp winds had cleared the light snow away; the bottom of the gorge was of stone, hard and unyielding, and no trace of the trail could he discover.

The two men had arranged a simple code of signals, and the Sparkler now summoned the major.

The veteran was near at hand. In another minute the two were together, discussing the discovery, and it was finally agreed that Major Marker should remain at the mouth of the gorge until Shasta Sam could make a brief exploration of its yawning depths.

Accordingly, the veteran sought a sheltered spot, crouched down, and patiently waited, while the Sparkler plunged ahead, keeping close to the foot of the frowning wall, and occasionally raising the slide of his lantern a trifle to guard against the numerous pitfalls hedging his path.

The situation was at once thrilling and dangerous, wild and fascinating.

No sounds broke the stillness of the night save those due to Nature and to Nature's wildest creatures. And to Shasta Sam, steady of nerve, cool and undaunted, these were as music. The mournful wailing of the wind, as it swept through that mighty rift in the mountains, softened and subdued by the rippling of a tiny stream plunging down from distant heights—the howling of a ravenous beast in quest of food, and the dismal croaking and screeching of birds of prey as they whirled and circled through the air, were but part of a great voice he had long since learned to love—the voice of Nature in her wildest mood.

Pushing steadily onward until he had reached a sheltered bend in the gorge, the Sparkler again opened his lantern and closely examined his surroundings.

There, protected from wind and sun, the snow stretched from wall to wall, save where cut through by the narrow stream, and the footprint of neither horse nor man was to be seen.

"They've taken the water, if they came this way," the Sparkler muttered, as he slowly crossed and recrossed from wall to wall. "The other gulch must be the one, and—"

He ended abruptly, and his hand closed swiftly upon his revolver.

Just before him, in the snow, lying on its side, was a huge grizzly—dead.

Beside the brute, crushed and mangled almost beyond recognition, lay all that was mortal of Giles Honeyfang!

CHAPTER XXX.

WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT.

Despite his coolness and nerve, Shasta Sam was startled.

So sudden, so wholly unexpected, was that ghastly discovery, that for fully a minute he felt powerless to move.

Had Giles Honeyfang, in life and with weapons in hand, thus abruptly confronted him, the effect would have been vastly different.

Shaking off the peculiar feeling that had assailed him, the Sparkler stepped forward and knelt beside the dead desperado.

Now that the end had come, no feeling of resentment against Giles Honeyfang lingered in the heart of the sport.

Carefully he went through the dead

man's pockets, removing every article, whether of value or not, and listing each in his notebook. Then he took off the belt of arms and a money belt which he detected around the body, under the clothing.

This latter belt, old and worn and valueless in itself, contained a number of closely folded papers, but no money. As Shasta Sam opened and looked at the first of these documents his expression changed and his lips twitched nervously.

"Great God!" he exclaimed. "Murder surely will out, for this paper identifies Kenneth Morgan as Rafael Reno, leader of the gang that murdered poor Daniel Estell, and the scoundrel is now certain to hang!"

"I doubt not that the whole story of Solomon Zebender's crimes is laid bare in these documents, and so Wild Nell's inheritance will beyond doubt be secured to her!"

Then the Sparkler, without further delay, entered each of the documents on his list, and, as it was impossible to give the body burial, prepared to return to Major Marker, who was in waiting at the outlet of the gorge.

He knew, now, that the Red Raiders had not passed through the canyon; for, had they done so, the pockets of Honeyfang would have been rifled, and every article of value on the body taken.

So, with lantern closed, he quickly retraced his steps and rejoined the major, to whom he briefly narrated his experience.

The veteran was surprised, but by no means displeased, to hear of the tragic fate of Giles Honeyfang.

"In life he was a misabul houn', an' I ain't got no license ter weep now 'at he's dead," he muttered in a matter-of-fact tone.

"An' now, Pard Sam, I've bin doin' a heap o' thinkin' while settin' hyar, but I've kep my eyes open, too, an' made a leetle diskivery of my own.

"I saw a lantern flash up yender on the hill, straight ahead, an' I'm bettin' ther den is thar.

"Now, ef ye say the word, I'll skip back an' hev ther boys move up, so thar'll be mighty leetle loss o' time when we're ready ter strike.

"Et's a puffectly safe bet thar's more'n one way ter leave ther den, an' ef ther Red Raiders diskiver us comin' we'll hev a long chase on hand, ef they don't escape us altogether.

"Of course, et's your say-so in this hyar matter, Pard Sam, but I war kalkilatin' thet ther nigher we c'u'd creep in before day, ther better our chances 'u'd be fer makin' a sweep."

Shasta Sam nodded approval.

"Your idea is certainly a good one, Major, and worthy of an old campaigner," he returned.

"We'll bring the boys up, then locate the den and creep in and surround it, so that when the alarm is given the Red Raiders will not only find themselves completely hemmed in, but have very little opportunity to harm the captives.

"So, you return to the camp in the lower canyon, explain matters to Landlord Swift, and have him move the men up, while I scout ahead and try to locate our game.

"Let the men halt here and remain until I return, or they have cause to believe that I, too, have ben corralled by the Raiders."

Then the men separated, Major Marker retreating in the direction of the basin, while Shasta Sam continued up the gorge, which gradually grew narrower and finally ended in a mere gully at the foot of a short, steep slope.

Here the darkness was less intense; it was a clear, starlit night, and, once out of the dense shadows cast by the towering walls, the Sparkler had little difficulty in determining the course the Red Raiders had pursued.

The trail led straight to the foot of an overhanging bluff, and there entered the narrow mouth of a cavern.

That much the Sparkler had learned,

when a hasty step within caused him to retreat and seek the shelter of a convenient niche in the wall.

The next minute the form of a man emerged from the cavern.

For a moment the fellow gazed around suspiciously, then bent his head low to listen.

"I was sure I heard a stealthy step," he muttered, his low tones distinctly audible to the lurking spy. "But all seems clear.

"It is time the chief was here, and, while anxiously waiting his coming, each sound, however slight, has seemed a step.

"The end of this wild and desperate life has come for me. Last night serves as a warning. It was a narrow escape, for the shot from Old Betty Moselle came near ending my days. The chief must now make terms with me, and allow me to go my way in peace, or one of us shall die.

"This detective, Shasta Sam, something tells me, is upon our trail for the murder of that youth years ago, and the gallows are horribly near for all who were there that day.

"Curse that crime! It was my first, and to this day it haunts me! While it was not my hand that took his life, yet I was there to help, and the blood of Daniel Estell lies heavily upon my soul."

Then the outlaw seated himself upon a bowlder, and, with head bowed down, seemed to review his unhappy past.

Thus the minutes passed, with Shasta Sam in hiding so near that he might almost have touched the brooding outlaw. More than once the sport felt strongly tempted to spring forward, strike down and capture the fellow, but each time resisted the impulse, confident that more was to be gained by playing a waiting game.

Then both men were suddenly startled by quick, restless steps on the bluff above, and the outlaw sprang to his feet, muttering:

"It is the chief!

"Now, I will know what fate holds in store for me, for I shall cast the die, to win or lose!"

A moment he stood, then a dark form appeared at the foot of the bluff, and quickly resolved itself into the shape of a masked man.

"Ho, Bledso! You are on guard, I see.

"It is well; and were all like you, the Red Raiders would be more prosperous, indeed!"

"Yes, Rafael Reno, I am on guard," was the outlaw's stern reply. "On guard, not for the band, but to meet you here, for I have much to say that must remain a dead secret between us.

"I am sick of this life. My soul revolts at continual crime, and I am here to demand my release.

"I wish no longer to owe allegiance to you or the band, but desire to go my way in peace.

"That is why I am here in waiting, Rafael Reno, and I demand the fulfillment of the pledge you gave long years ago, when first I cast my fortune with yours."

The chief, Dick Dread, listened in undisguised amazement.

"Ha! Caleb Bledso, this is treachery!" he exclaimed in bitter tones. "You intend to desert—to destroy our chances of success to the marplot!

"You know the laws of the Red Raiders—that the course you propose for yourself is punished with death.

"But you have been a faithful member—you have obeyed orders without question, and because of your fidelity I now ask you to reconsider—to retract your rash words and take the oath anew!"

Caleb Bledso faced the chief boldly and unflinchingly.

"And I decline, Rafael Reno!" he sternly replied. "You shall fulfill your pledge to me, or one of us never leaves this spot alive!"

Then from the lips of the chief burst a snarl of rage, and the revolver in his hand gleamed faintly in the starlight.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN OFFER OF MONEY.

"Hold, Kenneth Morgan!

"That man shall have a chance for his life, or you both die, here and now!"

And, with that bold challenge upon his lips, Shasta Sam leaped from the niche, and, with leveled revolvers, covered both Bledso and the chief.

The denouement was a startling one, wholly unexpected by either outlaw, and both unconsciously lowered their weapons.

Then, peering sharply through the darkness, Kenneth Morgan recognized the Sparkler.

"Shasta Sam!" he exclaimed with an oath, expressive of bitter surprise.

"Yes, Shasta Sam!" the sport grimly affirmed. "I have trailed you down at last, Rafael Reno, and I am here to demand your surrender!

"You murdered Daniel Estell at Solomon Zebender's behest, and for your reward extorted the Good Luck Mine, a part of the youth's share of the Estell estate.

"Your crime is known to me in all its blackness. The evidence is at last complete, and you shall pay the penalty.

"Resist, or cry aloud, and I will shoot you down with as little mercy as I would show a wolf!"

While speaking, the Sparkler had slowly moved forward. Now he deftly reversed the revolver in his right hand, and brought down the heavy butt with crushing force upon Rafael Reno's head, dropping him senseless in his tracks.

Caleb Bledso stood unmoved.

"You have expressed a desire to quit this life," Shasta Sam continued, addressing the motionless outlaw.

"I was in hiding here when you came from the cave, and heard you reproach yourself for your many crimes, before Rafael Reno came.

"Then I heard your demand of him, and I believe that you are sincere in your desire to abandon outlawry forever."

"I am, so help me Heaven!" Bledso earnestly exclaimed.

"Years ago that man led me into crime, and made me swear allegiance to him, pledging himself to absolve me from the oath, without malice and without enmity, should I ever request it.

"Twice before this day I have made the demand, and been coerced into withdrawing it, but to-night I was bitterly determined, and it would have been his life or mine had you not appeared.

"Years ago a cloud came upon my life, and I was driven into exile; now that cloud is gone, and could I bury the past and escape from these hills, I might live happily.

"My hands have never been stained with innocent blood, and there would be but little upon my conscience.

"But it is not to be. The end has come. I am a prisoner, and must stand my trial as an accomplice in the murder of Daniel Estell, and go to the gallows or to prison for life, though Heaven knows I was guiltless of murder or intent to murder. I even tried to save the boy, but was driven back and beaten into submission."

The Sparkler bowed affirmatively.

"That is true, I know," he declared, quietly. "I was with Daniel Estell when he died, and his words then bear out your words now.

"Pledge me your word, Bledso, that you will lend me your assistance till this case is made clear, and I'll promise you freedom and a clean record."

"I will do it, and gladly," the outlaw returned, deeply moved.

And the alliance thus strangely made was sealed by a firm clasp of the hands.

With the assistance of Bledso, Sam Shelby disarmed, and bound Rafael Reno, who was yet unconscious, then they carried him into the niche in which the Sparkler had been concealed. That done, the two seated themselves beside the prisoner, and Shasta asked:

"How many men are in the cavern, Bledso?"

"There are eight."

"And the captives?"

"They are there, too, but off by themselves, securely bound and guarded.

"The plot was to hold them there until the girl could be forced into marrying Red Belt, the Sport," Bledso continued. "It was that, and the proposal to do away with Judge Estell, that urged on my revolt at this time, for Wild Nell is a splendid girl, while Red Belt is a miserable scoundrel, as cruel and merciless as Satan himself.

"He is known as Kent Keene to members of the band, but is really Prince Mars, head of the Mountain League, which made such a stir a hundred miles north of here a few months ago. He was supposed to have been wiped out with the League, but escaped and made his appearance in Blue Jacket, a few days after the big round-up at Prickly Pear Camp. In some way, he learned of Zebender's secret, and at once begun plotting to get possession of the Estell estate.

"It chanced that Rafael Reno had the same end in view, and discovered Red Belt's game. That produced a clash, which ended in the two joining forces, each of the leaders having equal power, and each known, when in direct command, as Dick Dread.

"By this arrangement, one or the other could always remain in Blue Jacket, to keep an eye on Zebender, who had become greatly alarmed and was acting queerly. It puzzled the men, too, for none but myself and the negroe, Eph, knew that there were two chiefs. Some thought that Red Belt was the man, while others held that Dick Dread was Kenneth Morgan.

"The first move was to raid old Zebender's cabin, in search of evidence of his theft of the Estell fortune. The raid amounted to nothing, but it alarmed the miser, and over the protests of Kenneth Morgan and Giles Honeyfang he decided to make restitution, so wrote to you and Judge Estell.

"Then Honeyfang, to block the game, poisoned the miser, and attempted to make way with Old Antelope, that he might spirit Wild Nell away, but was forestalled by the Red Raiders, who captured the hunter and brought him here.

"Of his escape you know, but I may say that Wild Nell's accusation of Honeyfang was based on truth, while Zetta Zebender's evidence in your behalf at the trial was also true, for the two roughs really killed Old Antelope, using your knife, which they had in some way secured, to throw the crime upon you, for both feared and hated you.

"But for the cross-purposes developed in the various plots to secure the fortune, it would almost surely have fallen into the hands of some one other than Wild Nell, and for her sake, if nothing else, I am heartily glad that you reached Blue Jacket, evaded the various plots against your life, and are now in a fair way to triumph."

Sam Shelby had listened closely to the rapid disclosures of Bledso, and that his new-found ally was speaking truly he could not doubt.

Many things which had puzzled Shasta not a little were now made clear, and for the first time he fully realized the desperate character of the clan he had been fighting.

Bledso was about to speak again, but a warning touch upon his arm caused him to withhold further revelations, just then.

Rafael Reno, with eyes glowing cat-like in the darkness, was fully conscious, and listening to every word!

"Curse you for a traitor, Caleb Bledso!" he exclaimed, in a low, intense voice, as he vainly struggled to rise. "I'll yet be free, and then you have a care!"

Bledso made no reply, but under cover of the night a terrible look crossed his face.

With a few low-spoken words to his ally, the Sparkler stripped the bonds from his captive's legs, raised him to his feet, gripped his collar tightly, and started down the slope.

Not until they had reached the gorge did either speak. Then Rafael Reno turned his face toward his captor, and in a low voice said:

"The jig is up, Shasta! You have won, and I give you credit for it, but I have a proposition to make: I will give you ten thousand dollars in gold, evidence that will secure Wild Nell her inheritance, and swear to leave the country forever if you will give me my freedom!"

The Sparkler coldly replied:

"I have my grip upon you, Rafael Reno, and not all the gold in this world will loosen it!"

"Daniel Estell was my pard—my boy pard. There was no tie of blood between us, but man never loved a younger brother more warmly than I loved him."

"And you killed him!"

"Release you? Never! As long as flesh and blood would endure, that long could I walk through glowing, burning coals to bring you to the doom you so richly merit!"

"That is my answer, and it is final!"

CHAPTER XXXII. THE JUDGE.

Judge Ichabod Estell forgot his age and his dignity, and cursed most furiously when bound upon a horse by the Red Raiders.

"You shall pay dearly for this insult—every blade of you!" he anathematised, his keen blue eyes flashing with his rage. "Affairs have come to a pretty pass in this civilized country when a citizen of my standing can be set upon, seized, bound, and conveyed into the solitude of the mountains, there to be held for ransom, with impunity!"

"But, we'll get the ransom, Judge," the leader, none other than Bledso, dryly remarked.

"Oh, yes! I reckon you'll get the ransom, confound you!" was the furious retort. "I'll pay the money, then spend twice as much in raising an army to wipe you fellows out! I'll invoke the aid of the Government! I'll lobby a bill through making such offenses a capital crime! I'll—"

"Oh, come off, yer old galoot!" sang out one of the outlaws, as he swung himself gracefully into the saddle. "Yer hangin' up sech a bluff, we'll all want'er disband an' hire out ter yer! Money? Yer must be loaded with et!"

Then the Judge, glaring at the fellow in an irascible way, subsided.

It required but a moment to secure the prisoner beyond any chance of escape, and the Red Raiders at once started on their retreat through Dead Man's Canyon.

Two of the outlaws rode well in advance; after them came Bledso and the judge, while the remainder of the party were nearly a hundred yards in the rear.

This formation precluded the possibility of escape by a sudden dash in either direction, and the Judge gritted his teeth in silent rage.

But Bledso had an object in thus arranging his forces, aside from any desire to provide against the prisoner's escape.

When several miles had been covered, he glanced over his shoulder, then looked straight ahead, and in a low voice said:

"Judge Estell, I have something of the utmost importance to say, and I am going to trust to your discretion."

"This act of your seizure is not voluntary upon my part, for I am forced to perform it by circumstances which I cannot now explain. Let it suffice, at present, that this is my last night with the Red Raiders, and that before I go I'll contrive some way in which to release you, together with your niece, known here as Wild Nell, who, with her foster mother, is also a captive."

"I tell you this, now, that you may understand all that happens from this hour on, and I trust you will so comport yourself as not to give the men any idea that you expect help from any source whatever."

The judge regarded the outlaw curiously for nearly a minute; then a shrewd look crossed his stern old face.

"Very good, sir—very good!" he exclaimed. "I am willing to enter into almost any kind of an arrangement that promises to curtail the duration of my enforced sojourn among your delectable cutthroats."

"And may I ask, kind sir, what monetary consideration you expect?"

Beneath his hood-like mask, Bledso's face twitched, and he flung up his hand in a gesture partly anger, partly despair.

"Not a dollar—not a single, solitary red cent of your infernal money!" he retorted, almost savagely. "Do you understand?"

The judge nodded and his expression changed.

"I did not understand," he declared, frankly. "I do now. Pardon me."

"Certainly," and Bledso smiled grimly. "The mistake was quite natural, I assure you, and now to explain:

"The Red Raiders are not a regular road-agent band, but have been organized simply and solely to aid two unscrupulous citizens of Blue Jacket in carrying out a deep-laid scheme to obtain possession of the wealth left by your brother, Ishmael Estell."

"It is needless for me to go into detail concerning this fortune, for you doubtless understand the very peculiar state of affairs in connection with it, brought about by the late Solomon Zebender."

Again Judge Estell nodded, then, in surprise, quickly asked:

"Is Zebender dead? I received a letter from him only recently, and since then one from my son, speaking of Zebender as alive!"

Bledso started visibly, while a spasm of pain seemed to contract his frame.

"Your son, Judge Estell?" he echoed.

Estell's face turned red, then deathly pale, and in a voice quivering with strong emotion he replied:

"My step-son, Samuel Shelby, I should have said, for I have no other!"

"But you had a son, Judge Estell!"

"Confound you! Why do you remind me of that? Am I responsible for Abner Estell's crimes, that they should ever be flung into my face?" and the prisoner's voice fairly rang with fury, while his face grew ghastly in its pallor.

"Pardon me, Judge Estell," Bledso coldly returned. "It was not my intention to wound you; but Abner Estell sent me forth into the world, an outcast—made me what I am! His crime was laid at my door, and he, like a cringing, cowardly cur, let me suffer, instead of stepping forth and proclaiming my innocence!"

Judge Estell reeled in the saddle, flung up his hands, and but for his bonds he would have fallen.

"Oh, God!" he ejaculated, in a strangely hushed and choking voice. "I see it all, now! You, my poor friend; are George Gilbert, the son of my partner—my dearest friend!"

Bledso thrust forth his hand in an eloquent gesture.

"Hush!" he cried, with chilling sternness. "Never!—never again utter that name while it is trailed in the dust of dishonor! Let it die beneath the accursed blight put upon it."

Estell clutched savagely at his throat. Sobs shook his short but sturdy frame, and the tears streamed down his bearded face.

After a moment he turned to Bledso, saying, brokenly:

"George Gilbert, there is no dishonor, save that which has fallen upon my guilty son, and through him, upon me! I know that you are innocent—the world knows it! Society—all who knew you in the past, stand ready to welcome you back with open arms!"

Bledso, in turn, was deeply moved, but after a different manner; he was stunned—dazed; but, after a moment, a realization of the full import of Estell's words dawned upon him. His whole being throbbed and quivered with joy!

He dared not trust himself to speak, for he felt that he would shout aloud in his exultation. With a powerful effort he suppressed his exuberance, and turning to his prisoner, in a voice thrilled with profound emotion, exclaimed:

"Judge Estell, may God bless you! You have lifted a load from my soul—a load that for many dismal years has weighed it in the dust!"

CHAPTER XXXIII. THE CAPTIVES.

For some little time Judge Ichabod Estell made no response to the outlaw's fervent words.

The judge was a proud old man. He had felt most keenly his only son's disgrace, and had cast him off as utterly unworthy. Now, the wound was reopened by this chance encounter with Abner Estell's victim, and his agony of mind was something pitiful.

But he was a just man. His duty, as he conceived it, was plainly before him, and nothing could balk him of its full execution.

Rallying his sadly shaken powers, he again turned to Bledso and continued:

"Yes, Abner was the thief! He planned and executed the robbing, then cunningly turned the tide of suspicion against you, and even manufactured proof that would insure your conviction."

"Of your arrest, escape, recapture, and trial I need not speak, save to say that many, believing you the victim of cruel circumstances, rejoiced when it was learned that you had a second time slipped the authorities and fled West."

"More than a year had passed, and the affair had faded from the minds of many, when the robbery was repeated, and this time suspicion pointed to Samuel Shelby, who was at home on a visit, and he was promptly arrested, but as quickly bailed out, when he, too, disappeared."

"But Shelby had not taken flight. He had simply disguised himself most thoroughly, and was lingering in the town, waiting and watching."

"He had suspected Abner, and so followed him by night and by day, until he secured proofs to clear not only himself, but you as well, and indict my misguided son."

"Then he came to me, laid the facts bare, and sought my advice."

"There was but one thing I could say to him, and that I did say, although it well-nigh broke my heart to do it. I advised that he place the whole matter in the hands of the prosecutor, which he did, and Abner was forthwith arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to ten years in prison."

"He had fought the case desperately; but the proof was conclusive; there was no loophole through which he could escape, and he was carried away, swearing direct vengeance upon Samuel Shelby."

"Then I disowned him, for his devilish plot to fasten his crimes upon two innocent and honorable men had banished from my heart every atom of love I had ever felt for him."

"A year later he escaped from the penitentiary, in company with a desperate convict, a murderer, and from that time nothing has been heard of him."

"Now, George Gilbert, you will understand what I mean when I say there is no reproach upon your name, and that you are free to resume your place among men."

"And more, George Gilbert, I will make you my heir because of the wrong done you by one of my name, and you shall start into life a rich man."

Bledso sternly shook his head, saying:

"No, Judge Estell! I thank you for your kindly offer, but not one dollar of your money can I accept! My parents were honest, and I was born an honest man. What I am relentless fate has made me; and were I to take your money, it would be a reproach to me—a constant reminder of my miserable past."

"No, no! If there is a place in the world for me I will find it without your aid, and earn the right to hold it!"

Judge Estell gazed curiously at the still hooded outlaw, but did not speak. Then, after a moment, Bledso, as we shall continue to call him, abruptly renewed the subject which had so curiously led to that welcome revelation.

In detail he explained the plot, as we have heard him reveal it to Shasta Sam, and, in conclusion, said:

"It is the intention of Kenneth Morgan and Red Belt to start the Red Raiders and the prisoners on their way out of the Territory at daybreak to-morrow, for the presence in Blue Jacket of Samuel Shelby has been such a menace to them that they have become alarmed.

"Now, Judge Estell, you will understand the importance of my warning to you to betray no sign that you expect help, for should the men become alarmed our chances of success would be greatly lessened.

"They look for no pursuit before to-morrow, and with the start they have they would easily escape.

"Morgan will be at the rendezvous to-night, and I will at once sever my connection with the band, and devise some way to effect a rescue."

"I will be most careful, Gilbert, and I thank you heartily for your good offices, whether or not the venture succeeds," Judge Estell earnestly responded.

Then both men, fearful that the prolonged conversation would attract attention and arouse the suspicion of the band, lapsed into silence, broken only by an occasional word.

Just at nightfall the cavern was reached. While the men put up the horses, Bledso conducted the judge to that portion of the den assigned to the prisoners, relieved the guard, and made the captives acquainted.

The place was lighted by a lantern, and through its murky glow Estell gazed keenly, even anxiously, at the face of his niece, Wild Nell.

A sigh of relief came from his lips and he mused:

"Beautiful—yes! But ignorant, I fear, and devoid of the social graces. How could it be otherwise? Poor child!—to be dragged for years through the wilderness by that hair-brained hunter, Abram Moselle!

"But she is yet young, and if her natural intelligence has not been dwarfed, a skilled governess and tutors should put her in presentable shape in due time."

These thoughts the astute old judge was most careful to keep to himself. He bowed ceremoniously to the girl, warmly grasped her slender hand, and, with a smile, said:

"My little niece—my dear Edith! I am happy indeed to greet you!

"That you are Ishmael's daughter I see, for your every feature recalls his boyish, beardless face."

From Wild Nell came a fitting response, sweetly in a modulated voice, and the mountain wail's conquest of Ichabod Estell was complete.

He was not only surprised, but charmed.

The judge then turned to Old Betty, grasped her claw-like hand, and warmly thanked her for her care of the wail.

That done, the trio sat down to discuss the situation.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

RAFAEL RENO'S RUSE.

Rafael Reno was in a quandary. Look which way he would, his cunning brain could discern no gleam of hope.

He was crestfallen, too, for that stinging rebuke from Shasta Sam, so quickly following the attempt at bribery, had dispelled a pet illusion.

He had long held the theory that all men could be bought, but that belief had recived a decided shock at the hands of the Sparkler.

So, as they slowly proceeded down the gorge, the helpless miscreant was in anything but a pleasant humor, and he bitterly cursed himself for the stupidity which had thrown him into the power of his relentless enemy.

"Had my nerve not failed me—had I only fired when he first leaped out from cover, I could have killed him, and then nothing would have stood in the way of my success," he thought, biting his lip.

"Curse it! There is something in the man's make-up that causes one to weaken and falter when facing him thus, for my nerve fled completely when I recognized him.

"I have long had secret doubts of Kent Keene's courage, but I must admit that he was bold indeed to face Shasta Sam!

"Well, I am snared at last, and to repine in useless. I must get my wits to work and plot to escape, for I am certainly getting dangerously near to the end of my rope!"

Shasta Sam seemed to divine his prisoner's thoughts, for he tightened his grip on the fellow's collar, and unconsciously quickened his pace.

Arrived at the canyon mouth, the Sparkler found that his men had not yet come up, so he forced his captive to a seat upon a bowlder, sat down beside him, and silently waited.

Nearly an hour had elapsed before the leaders of the party were heard, coming slowly and cautiously through the dark and dangerous pass.

Major Marker was the first to arrive, but the others were following closely in single file.

All had halted in the basin to load the pack animals with wood, for the night was cold and the gorge a cheerless place to encamp without fire, while it was the general belief that no attack could be made before daybreak.

But the presence of Shasta Sam, in waiting at the appointed spot, with the chief of the Red Raiders a prisoner, quickly altered this belief, and all waited most eagerly to hear the Sparkler's report.

The situation was tersely explained, but Shasta Sam did not detail his plan of attack, simply assuring the men that he had so arranged the matter that there could be no failure, if each promptly performed the part assigned him.

Then the horses were led into the intersecting gorge a short distance and securely hopped. Landlord Swift was detailed to guard the camp and the prisoner, and the little army silently marched away, with the Sparkler and Major Marker in the lead.

Left to himself, the landlord at once threw his prisoner to the ground and lashed his ankles together, then built a fire under the shelter of the overhanging bank and settled down to enjoy his pipe.

Rafael Reno gazed at the lone sentry a moment, with a peculiar gleam in his dark eyes.

"Peter," he exclaimed, at length, struggling to a sitting posture. "For heaven's sake put up that pipe. You are torturing me."

"Oh, I am, eh?" the landlord retorted.

"Yes, you are. You know that I am an inveterate smoker. Now, I have a case of good cigars in my pocket, but my hands are tied, and I cannot reach one, much less light it."

The captive spoke in a careless, good-natured way, calculated to disarm suspicion; but the landlord was wary, and simply replied:

"I reckon your hands'll stay tied, too, Kenneth Morgan."

"Certainly; that's as good as sworn to, with you on guard, Peter."

"But I would be greatly obliged to you if you would kindly take the case from my pocket, give me a cigar, and help me to a light."

The landlord pondered a moment. Then, as there seemed to be no particular harm in complying with the captive outlaw's request, he rose and helped him to the cigar and a lighted match.

"Thanks, Peter! You are a Christian and a gentleman!" Rafael Reno declared, lying down again, but now upon his side, and vigorously puffing away, while the landlord returned to his seat.

Then, for a brief spell neither spoke.

The captive was the first to break the silence.

"I say, Peter!" he exclaimed. "I would like to be a free man once more!"

"I would, too, if I were in your place, Kenneth Morgan," was the grim response.

"Yes? Well, what do you think I did to-night?"

"I give it up."

"You may believe me or not, but I offered Shasta Sam ten thousand in gold to let me escape, and then promised to leave the country forever."

"And he said 'No'!"

"Just that, Peter, with a good deal added to it," and Rafael Reno laughed in a peculiar way, then continued:

"But it would have been money wasted, Peter, had we traded."

"How so?"

"Because I am going to be free, anyhow!"

The tone in which this assertion was made aroused Landlord Swift's suspicions afresh, and he glanced quickly at the captive, then made a desperate grab for his repeating shotgun, which stood against the bank a few feet away.

But he was too late.

The wiry form of Raphael Reno shot through the air, and he descended fairly upon the back of the landlord, crushing him to the earth.

Then a vicious kick on the head stretched the unfortunate boniface senseless, and Rafael Reno was indeed free.

Quickly appropriating his victim's weapons and cartridge belt, the outlaw started toward the horses, but was checked by the sharp rattle of firearms, coming from the direction of the cavern.

"By heavens! If I hasten, I can slip past those devils, gain the top of the ridge, secure my own good horse, and be in Blue Jacket, prepared for flight, long before they come in," he muttered, and he sprang out into the canyon and walked rapidly toward the rendezvous.

"Yes, I am going to skip," he continued. "If Keene feels able to travel, well and good; if not, he can remain. Things are getting too decidedly warm for me, and the next time I fall down, Peter Swift's stupidity and kindness of heart will not be at hand to help me up. But for that cigar I could not have burned the rope from my wrists, and so freed my hands to untie my feet!"

"I've owed you one, my good friend Peter, for siding in with this Shasta Sam against an old residenter like myself, but I reckon the deal is squared."

Thus muttering and talking—one minute chuckling as he recalled some especially clever strokes he had made, the next vowing deepest vengeance against his enemies, Rafael Reno continued his rapid pace until he had reached the head of the gorge, where he cautiously crept up the slope and slipped past the cavern undetected.

Above, at the verge of the bluff, he paused to listen; but all was quiet below, save a low murmuring of voices deep within the cavern.

"The Red Raiders have been routed and the captives freed," he decided, after several minutes of patient listening, and then he hastened on to the point at which he had tethered his horse earlier in the night.

Mounting, he laid his course straight for Blue Jacket, by a route known only to himself and the members of the outlaw clan, and in a little more than two hours dismounted at his stable door.

Just as his feet touched the ground the door opened and Eph appeared.

"Hi, dar, Marse Morgan! You am back, I see!" the negro exclaimed, with a broad grin.

"Yes, Eph, but in a deuce of a hurry to go again!" was the grim response.

"Saddle three of the best horses in the stable, then put pack saddles and leading halters on three more, and get yourself ready for a long, hard ride."

"Hi, Marse! I'll do jes' dat."

"And, Eph!"

"Marse Morgan, sah?"

"Not a word to anyone that we are going! This is a skip where we don't come back, and it's not to be known."

"Right, sah! Yas, sah!"

Leaving the astonished negro to the performance of the task set him, Kenneth Morgan entered the house and proceeded straight to the library.

Red Belt, the Sport, was up and in waiting, and his dark eyes shone brightly as he greeted the mayor.

"The tide has turned at last, Morgan, and things are coming our way!" the gambler exclaimed, with a jubilant air.

"We've got Shasta Sam corralled so that nothing but an accident can save him, and the accident is not likely to occur!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

RIBBON ROB'S FIND.

Ribbon Rob had really divined the mission of Shasta Sam and his party, and when he resumed his way and swept around the curve there was a broad grin on his browned face.

"I'll shorely bet ther Red Raiders with a copper on ther stack, this hyar whirl!" he muttered, touching up his team with a sharp flick of the whip. "Shasta Sam may be on'y a plain, all-round sport, but I'm dinged ef he ain't win out on every outlaw's trail I've seed him jump!"

"Now, thar was Pistol Tommy's gang down thar et Tombstone—he snared ther hull outfit, or I'm a nacheral-born liar fer a fac'!"

"Then thar was Black Bill's band, over et Durango, an' Rio Grande Ralph's layout et El Paso, both scooped in es easy es suckers in spring, an' I shorely feel thet ther Red Raiders aire up ag'in' ther same sort o' net!"

"G'lang, Bill! Pete!" and the sharp crack of the jehu's whip echoed loudly on the crisp mountain air.

Then Ribbon Rob filled and lighted his pipe, and settled himself as comfortably as possible in the seat, and the old coach rattled and rumbled slowly onward after a dreary, haphazard fashion.

Yet the pace was a steady one, and the miles dropped slowly behind the crippled outfit until sunset, when Ribbon Rob suddenly put on the brakes and drew rein.

Just ahead a man's arm was thrust out from the shelter of a bowlder, and in the hand, moving slowly to and fro, was a blood-stained handkerchief!

"Trick, or fact?" the jehu muttered, staring hard at that grim signal. "Ef road-agents once more, they be shorely fooled, an' no mistake!"

Then, aloud, he hailed:

"Hallo! Hallo!"

"Show yourself, critter, fer this buss is late, an' I've no time fer foolin'!"

"Come out o' ther bresh, an' I'll guv ye a lift, but nary a step'll I budge off ther straight an' narrer way!"

The only answer was a deep groan, quickly followed by a more frantic waving of that hand and arm, and then Ribbon Rob, revolver in hand, leaped down into the trail, rapidly advanced to the bowlder, and peered over.

The sight that met his gaze was certainly a startling one.

Partly under the shelter of the bowlder lay the one who signalled, a man near unto death if appearances went for aught; while, beyond him a few feet, there lay a second form, cold and dead.

That Ribon Rob was surprised goes without saying; but now that he partially understood the case he was prompt to act.

Half carrying, half dragging the sorely wounded man from that dismal covert beside the trail, the driver got him to the coach, when the passengers leaped out and helped get him inside.

Then the dead body was dragged from cover and lashed on the coach deck, when Ribbon Rob said:

"I thank ye, pards, fer ther help ye've given, an' now I axes ye ter look after ther chap inside, an' don't let him tucker clean out ef ye kin help et, fer thar's a story back o' this, I reckon, which same'll p'int ter more devilmint by ther Red Raders, or I misses my guess!"

The passengers agreed to do their best, and Ribbon Rob, swinging himself back

into place on the seat, gave the horses a fresh start toward Blue Jacket.

Fully an hour after nightfall before the coach drew up in front of the Idaho House, but it was greeted by a gaping crowd. The landlord was absent, as Ribbon Rob knew, so he explained matters to the man in charge; then the wounded pick-up was promptly carried in and put to bed, while a messenger was hastily dispatched to find Dr. Samuels.

But Ribbon Rob did not delay to learn the doctor's verdict. There was a long and hard run before him, and he was now some three hours late.

So he briefly reported the hold-up, had his wheelers changed and new leaders put in, mounted to his seat, and sounded his horn.

At that moment Zetta Zebender came hurriedly from the hotel, deeply veiled, and entered the coach. With a last warning toot of the horn, Ribbon Rob cracked his whip and the heavy vehicle rolled away through the darkness.

It was the last seen of Zetta Zebender in Blue Jacket; no effort was made to trace her, but it was afterward learned she had entered a convent, and so we here bid her farewell.

To say that Kenneth Morgan, or, as we now know him, Rafael Reno, was surprised at that exultant declaration from Red Belt the Sport, is to state the case very mildly.

He was not only surprised, but deeply puzzled.

"Are you crazy?" he demanded in an irritable way. "Shasta Sam cornered, indeed! Why, man, the sport has us routed completely! Estell and his niece and Old Betty have been rescued, and the Red Raiders wiped out or captured."

"So completely, in fact, has been our defeat, that I have ordered Eph to get out the horses, that we may levant while there is time!"

The gambler's expression changed, and he looked nervous.

"In that case, we are ruined," he declared. "But, I do not see how Shasta Sam could have accomplished these wonders."

It may be well to remark here that Major Marker and Landlord Swift had been so secret in organizing the expedition for the Sparkler that its departure had remained a dead secret to all in Blue Jacket, until the arrival of Ribbon Rob.

"I do not understand it, myself," the mayor candidly admitted. "But I do know that I have stated the case very closely."

"I may add, too, that Caleb Bledso has turned traitor and joined hands with our enemies, and it was, perhaps, through him that they worked."

This bit of news was extremely annoying to Red Belt, and he gnawed savagely at the ends of his mustache, while Rafael Reno explained just what had happened.

"I reckon you've called the turn," he admitted, at length. "It looks very much as if we shall be compelled to go."

"But there is yet just a single chance of success," he continued. "When Ribbon Rob came in to-night he brought with him one of our men, who was wounded in the attack on Major Marker the other night, and who has since been lying in hiding along the trail, unable to get back to the den."

"This fellow, it turns out, is an outlawed son of Judge Estell, and hates Shasta Sam most bitterly, and so has sworn that the Sparkler is none other than Dick Dread, the Red Raider chief!"

"This story has taken like wildfire in the camp, and a mob is now organized and in waiting for the Sparkler, whom they intend to string up the moment he appears."

"But the idea is preposterous," Rafael Reno exclaimed. "I wonder that sane men can be gulled with such stuff!"

"Estell is very circumstantial in his account, and gives some facts which Shasta Sam would have great difficulty in controverting in case of a trial, for some of the statements are supported by the

testimony of Jehu Bill, with whom the Sparkler came into Blue Jacket.

"The only weak point in the case is that Estell vehemently swears that the Sparkler is his own cousin, Daniel Estell."

"And with Judge Estell out of the way, that would make the story only the more binding, for there would be none to controvert it," the mayor observed.

Then the two men fell to talking in lower tones, and as a result a fresh plot was quickly evolved.

It chanced that the ball from Shasta Sam's rifle that morning had struck a bone and glanced without really penetrating the breast of the gambler, and, aside from the soreness and tenderness naturally resulting from such a wound, he was little the worse for the duel, and quite able to play a minor part in the proposed undertaking.

Accordingly, Red Belt hastened to the stable, to inform Eph of the change in their plans and to give such instructions as were necessary.

Rafael Reno was differently employed.

The keen edge of a razor quickly reduced his luxuriant beard to a short mustache and imperial. Then he changed his clothing, donning a suit of tanned buckskin, with slouched hat, boots, and spurs.

When he had finished, so great was the change in his appearance that the negro Eph refused to recognize him!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ROUTING THE RAIDERS.

Halting his little army in the shadow of the bluff, a few paces from the cavern entrance, Shasta Sam glided forward alone and uttered a signal call agreed upon between himself and Caleb Bledso.

It was one in common use among the Red Raiders, and therefore not likely to arouse suspicion or attract undue attention.

The call was promptly answered, and then Bledso appeared from the cavern.

"The prisoner cannot be gotten out without creating alarm and putting the Red Raiders on their guard against attack," he announced, in a cautious undertone. "The chief has been expected all evening, and his failure to appear has excited the men somewhat."

"All preparations for fitting have been completed, and they are now merely awaiting his coming."

"Then we must strike quickly," Shasta Sam declared. "As I understand the matter, my men should have little difficulty in getting fairly between the captives and their keepers."

"The formation of the cavern certainly favors such a move. But, in the event of an alarm, your men must be prepared to close in with a rush, for the place is well fortified, and if you are once compelled to retreat the game is up."

"There shall be no retreat," was the incisive response.

"Now, Bledso, if you will return and take a position where you can guard the captives against possible harm, I will lead the men to the attack."

Caleb Bledso grasped the Sparkler's hand, then inclined his head, and retreated into the cavern.

Returning to his men, Shasta Sam quickly outlined the situation, explained to each just what was expected of him, then formed them in single file and led the way into the cavern.

Silently the seven rescuers glided through the dark and winding passage, until an abrupt bend in the course gave them a free and uninterrupted view of the den's interior.

The captives, they could see, were confined in a sort of subcavern, connecting with the main chamber by means of a natural arch.

Just within this arch was Bledso, talking to the guard.

The entire cavern was lighted by means of lanterns suspended from the walls, while near the centre of the main chamber were the remains of a fire.

This much had the intruders noted, when a fierce, wild yell announced that their presence had been detected.

"Forward, men, with a rush!" the Sparkler shouted, himself leaping out into the cavern, while the revolver in each hand cracked rapidly.

A blood-curdling yell answered his words, and then the six men from Blue Jacket spread out, right and left, and bore straight toward the gamely rallying Red Raiders, firing at every jump!

So sudden, so swift, so desperate, was that onslaught, that the Red Raiders, with half their number down, dead or wounded, broke and shrank back, then fled!

The guard in the subchamber had sprung to his feet at the first intimation of an attack, but before he could draw a weapon he was seized by Caleb Bledso, disarmed, and, with the assistance of Judge Estell, securely bound.

Leaving the pursuit of the fleeing outlaws to Major Marker and his men, Shasta Sam hastened to the captives.

He found the work of liberation completed, and was at once warmly greeted by his foster-father, Judge Estell.

"I knew you'd do it, Sam, my boy!" the latter cried, his grim old face relaxing as he wrung the Sparkler's hand.

"It hasn't been an hour since I told the ladies here that you'd surely turn up just in the nick o' time—as you always do!"

"And, now, Sam, I want you to meet an old friend, who has been tried and found true—George Gilbert!"

Shasta Sam smiled and warmly grasped Bledso's hand.

"I had fairly uncovered your identity, George," he assured. "But I wasn't quite sure, and so, perforce, deferred my questions until a more opportune moment."

"Your voice sounded most familiar to me, when I heard you communing with yourself at the cavern entrance, and then I recognized it."

"I am most glad to meet you, George, for we had given you up as dead."

Bledso was deeply moved by the warmth and earnestness of these old friends, and at once made haste to change the subject.

"I thank you, gentlemen, with all my heart," he replied.

"But, with your permission, I will now get out the horses, for we should leave here as quickly as possible."

"The Red Raiders embrace some thirty men in all, and the fellows who have escaped may succeed in rallying others of the band, return, and make it very warm for us."

"That is true," Shasta Sam assented. "We should return to Blue Jacket as early as possible."

Then, while Bledso hastened out to secure horses for the party, the Sparkler turned to Wild Nell and Old Betty for a moment's conversation, ere going forth to rally his scattered forces.

It required but a few minutes for those hurried preparations. Then the horses were led down into the gulch, and the entire party mounted and slowly set forward.

Arrived at the mouth of the intersecting canyon, Landlord Swift was discovered, sitting disconsolately before his fire, gun in hand and pipe in mouth.

"The devil's gone!" he grimly announced, rising to his feet as the party rode up. "He was too much for me, and made his escape."

Then he tersely told of Rafael Reno's cunning trick.

Shasta Sam's disappointment was most bitter, but no word of reproach passed his lips.

"It was a case of 'had to be,' I reckon," he remarked. "But it is a long, long trail that has no end, and Rafael Reno shall yet come to justice."

"He has returned to Blue Jacket, Shasta Sam," Caleb Bledso declared. "Many of the Red Raiders are denizens of that camp, and he has hastened there for help."

"There is a short route across the hills, by which we can reach the camp afoot by daybreak. If you say the word, the two of us can take that route, and block his game, while the rest of the

party go around by Dead Man's Canyon, and thus cut off his escape by way of the Rocky Bar trail."

"We'll do it," was the quick response.

"Major, you take charge of the party, and crowd the horses for all they are worth, to get into Blue Jacket as early as possible."

Then hasty farewells and parting injunctions were spoken, and Shasta Sam and his ally quickly retraced their steps through the gulch to the cavern, where both ascended to the top of the bluff and started rapidly in the direction taken by Rafael Reno a short time earlier.

The night was cold and clear and the route comparatively smooth, so that the two were able to make splendid time, and arrived on the outskirts of Blue Jacket but little more than an hour behind Rafael Reno.

"We'll have to exercise no little caution in this matter," the Sparkler suggested. "Owing to the fact that many of the Red Raiders belong in camp, we are in constant danger of making known our errand to the wrong man."

"I'll be able to spot the members of Reno's crowd," Bledso returned. "It is so near sunrise that we should be able to gather a pretty fair army from the various saloons, for the denizens of Blue Jacket, as a rule, are pretty apt to get up dry, and they'll be out in force by the time we round-up the camp."

"That is true," assented the Sparkler. "And I suppose we might as well begin with the Idaho House and go right down the line."

This suggestion met with his ally's approval, and the two men at once laid their course toward the hotel.

Caleb Bledso had taken off and thrown away his mask, and as there was naught else in his appearance or make-up to connect him with the Red Raiders, he felt that he had nothing to fear in boldly going anywhere.

As they approached the Idaho House Shasta Sam unconsciously took the lead, flung open the door and entered.

To his intense surprise, the barroom was fairly crowded with men, and on his appearance a general shout went up.

It required no second glance to tell him that the throng was hostile to him, and, with back against bar, he quickly dropped his hands to his weapons.

"Stiddy, sport! Don't draw, ef ye love life!" called the leader of the throng, a burly fellow dressed as a miner, and with the words he pressed the muzzle of a cocked revolver fairly against the Sparkler's head!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CLOSING IN.

Thus entrapped Shasta Sam could do naught but yield, and in another minute he had been disarmed and his hands securely pinioned.

"Now, Dick Dread, ye may say yer prayers, fer yer time hes come," the rough continued, as he tested the bonds. "We're the Vigilantes o' Blue Jacket, we is, an' we means ter clean out ther Red Raiders, root an' branch, so begins with you!"

"But I am not Dick Dread!—I am not a Red Raider!" Shasta Sam declared, with flashing eyes. "I am plain Sam Shelby, sport! I've raided the Raiders, scattered the band, and rescued their captives during the night, as a dozen witnesses will shortly prove."

"I demand a fair show and a trial—"

"A trial ye'll git, too," quickly cut in the rough, Buck Collins by name. "Thet's jest what we'll give ye—a fair one, too, but quick!"

"Come, pards, two o' ye bring him along, fer ef ther wounded Red Raider owns we've got ther chief, thet's trial enough, fer sure, ter hang him!"

A shout of approval went up from the crowd, and then two of the roughs seized Shasta Sam and hurried him into the dining room, and thence up stairs to the chamber in which lay the dying outlaw, Abner Estell!

There was little of life remaining in that sorely wounded body; but upon the

bustling entrance of the Vigilantes and their victim, closely followed by Caleb Bledso, Abner Estell rallied from his stupor, and his sharp, bright eyes eagerly scanned that group of faces.

"Sam—Sam Shelby!" he ejaculated, faintly, yet with a thrill of joy in his unsteady tones, as his gaze met the sternly handsome face of Shasta Sam.

"Yes, Abner Estell—Sam Shelby," the Sparkler returned, not unkindly. "And I am sorry, boy, that you have come to this, for your father is now here, and soon must know all."

"My father, you say?"

"Yes, your father. He was captured from the Rocky Bar stage by Red Raiders yesterday, but was rescued last night and is now near here."

"And now, Abner Estell, do you know this man?" and the Sparkler turned abruptly and inclined his head in the direction of Caleb Bledso.

Slowly, carefully, the eyes of the moribund scanned the bronzed and bearded face before him; then he feebly shook his head.

"I do not," he muttered. "And yet—the eyes—"

"Yes, by heavens! It is George Gilbert!"

"Great God! Why do my crimes rise up to haunt my dying hour!"

Wildly rang that cry, and the moribund sprang half erect, to sink back weak and limp, almost lifeless!

"Have peace, Abner Estell!" spoke Bledso quietly. "I come not here to harm you; the past has been made clear, and now that you are dying, I freely forgive your sins against me!"

"But here is one against whose life you are plotting even now—"

"Yes! yes!" interrupted the wretched outcast, groaning. "Out of revenge for fancied wrongs I have tried to swear his life away—to have him hanged as Dick Dread, chief of the Red Raiders!"

"But it is not too late to undo that wrong and die with my conscience clear, so I now say to all that Samuel Shelby is guiltless of any crime."

"Dick Dread, the chief, lives in this camp, but whether he is the man known as Red Belt, the Sport, or Kenneth Morgan, I cannot swear, but his identity lies between them."

"Both hanged would be better than either living, for both are murderous rascals, and are leagued in crime."

Then a sudden sinking spell prevented further speech, and Abner Estell lay back upon the bed, gasping for breath.

Buck Collins took off his hat, and ruefully scratched his head.

"I do reckon, Shasta Sam, thet we owe ye an erpology, es ther feller says," he exclaimed. "Dang me! We took thet critter's word, an' took et fer straight, too, an' hev been layin' fer ye all night."

"But now he takes et all back, an' we takes et all back, too, an' wishes yer good luck, while ye goes free!"

The bonds dropped from the Sparkler's wrists, and with a curt nod to his erstwhile captors he recovered his weapons and turned to the bed.

Caleb Bledso was bending over the moribund, busy with those offices so essential to the peace of the soul-sick, and with a simple word or two of explanation Shasta Sam quitted the apartment and descended to the dining room.

That the Sparkler was worn and weary and nearly famished, goes without the saying; but he contented himself, just then, with ordering his breakfast, then sought Buck Collins in the barroom.

That rough but honest man was in the act of drowning his disappointment at the unexpected climax to the lynching bee in a glass of raw liquor, but at a word from the Sparkler he was all attention.

Then Shasta Sam tersely explained the errand which had carried himself and Caleb Bledso to the camp afoot that morning, ahead of the main party, and at once enlisted the services of Collins.

The rough was to pick a half dozen cool and reliable men, and report with them, thoroughly armed, at the barroom in a half hour, to proceed under the

Sparkler's lead against the stronghold of Kenneth Morgan.

"The man is mayor of Blue Jacket, I know, but he was caught red-handed, and I will be wholly responsible for the attack upon his house," Shasta Sam assured, and then he produced a document, which he handed to Collins for his inspection.

The authority bestowed by that paper was ample to remove any uneasiness the rough may have felt, and he bowed with increased respect as he hurried away to perform his work.

Not until then had Shasta Sam felt at liberty to make amends for his long fast, but now that the opportunity was his, he hurried in to his breakfast.

Lena Swift was awaiting his appearance, and as he sat down at the table she placed in his hands the packet of papers left for him by Zetta Zebender.

A glance was sufficient to establish their value, for they related to the Estell estate, and the Sparkler at once placed them securely in his pocket, then opened Zetta Zebender's letter.

It was short and to the point. It was dated at the Idaho House, Blue Jacket, and ran as follows:

"Mr Shelby—Sir: Herewith you will find a number of the documents relating to the case which has called you to Blue Jacket Camp. There are others in the possession of Giles Honeyfang, stolen from me at the moment you so bravely came to my rescue.

"Of the alleged crimes of my father, Solomon Zebender, I know nothing; but I hereby relinquish all claim to the so-called Estell estate, reserving only the money which I have in my actual and absolute possession and know to have been my father's.

"I trust that you may attempt to give me no trouble concerning the Estell estate. I go direct to a convent, there to remain, but I wish you continued success. Respectfully,

"Zetta Zebender."

"A peculiar girl, truly!" he muttered. "But she may go her way; my fight is not with her," and placing the letter in his pocket, he turned to his breakfast.

Scarcely had the meal ended, when Buck Collins appeared, to announce that the men were in readiness.

"Mount then, Buck, for the fox may break cover and give us a chase," the Sparkler suggested, hastily examining his revolvers and rifle. "He's one to die hard."

The rough chuckled. "Right ye aire," he assented. "But ther men aire in ther saddle, an' aire waitin' fer you, Sparkler."

At the point where the pathway leading to Kenneth Morgan's house joined the northern trail, Shasta Sam and his party met the returning expedition, with Major Marker in the lead, and after a few words of explanation on both sides, the forces were consolidated, Landlord Swift continuing on to the hotel, with Judge Estell, Wild Nell, and Old Betty.

At the head, now, of something more than a dozen well-armed citizens, Shasta boldly charged the mayor's house, and surrounded it.

A sharp hail, repeated twice, brought no response; then the Sparkler dismounted and tried the door.

It was not locked.

"They have fled!" he exclaimed, in keen disappointment.

A short search verified his words, and the party reassembled to return to Blue Jacket; but, at that moment, a piercing scream rent the air, and up from the throats of Blue Jacket's citizens came a great shout of alarm.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A GAME FIGHT.

Laughing and chatting in sheer lightness of heart, now that the perils which had hedged them were fast disappearing, Landlord Swift and his little party had resumed their way, to canter slowly along the trail in to the camp.

Arrived at the Idaho House, the landlord and Judge Estell dismounted, and both had turned to help Old Betty down, when, with a swift clatter of iron-shod hoofs, a horseman in buckskin dashed up and seized Wild Nell!

A piercing scream broke from the lips of the girl, and she struggled most desperately to escape; but the strong arm encircling her trim waist deftly swung her clear of her saddle, to a position in front of the bold rider!

Then, with the speed of a rocket, the doubly burdened horse leaped away, while a great shout went up from the numerous persons witnessing that daring and reckless act.

The horse all recognized as one belonging to Kenneth Morgan, or Rafael Reno, as we now know him; but the rider was a stranger, for none knew the mayor in his cunning disguise.

Promptly both the landlord and Judge Estell flung themselves into the saddles so lately vacated, and put spurs to horses in quick and desperate pursuit.

But the animal bestrode by the outlaw, being fresh and powerful, gained rapidly on the jaded steeds of the pursuers, and so swept out of camp fully five hundred yards in the lead.

But from the northern end of Blue Jacket there came a wild, fierce yell of peculiar intonation, and down the sharp slope thundered a fleet, clean-limbed roan, bearing Shasta Sam!

By intuition, almost, the Sparkler had divined the meaning of that scream, and the hoarse shout following. To at once whirl his horse and dart away in swift pursuit, leaving his dazed followers grouped before the mayor's cottage, was his act.

Major Marker was quick to rally his wits, and, with a word to the men, he, too, struck spurs to horse, and galloped down the slope.

Although he had cleared the camp's confines in safety, Rafael Reno heard that yell with a feeling of dread, and with roweling spurs urged on his powerful and fleet horse to greater efforts, for he now knew that Shasta Sam had again escaped and was on his trail!

But, swiftly almost as a meteor shooting through space, the roan thundered down the hill and through the camp, at the southern boundary, passing both Judge Estell and Landlord Swift, and sweeping out upon the lower trail in rapidly gaining pursuit!

To the straining ears of Rafael Reno there came the steady hoof-beats of the roan, and his newly shaven face took on a worried, hunted expression, while his gleaming eyes glanced wildly from side to side.

"Curse it! Can Keene and Eph have deserted me," he gritted, through hard-set teeth. "Now is the time, for an ambush here would rid us of Shasta Sam and check pursuit!

"But—Aha!"

And with that ejaculation, a cruel smile parted his pale, thin lips. For, snugly ensconced behind the boulders and huge rocks bordering the trail at that point were Red Belt, the Sport, and the negro Eph, one on the right, the other on the left, but both mounted and with weapons in hand!

"That will wipe out the score with you, Samuel Shelby!" Rafael Reno muttered, in a voice of cold and sinister exultation. "With Kent Keene out of the way I shall hold the winning hand for both girl and fortune!"

Wild Nell, having ceased to struggle, was calmly biding her time—waiting for a chance to escape; but at these significant words her large, black eyes flashed right and left, to detect those lurking forms, and from her lips burst a shrill cry of warning:

"Look! Sam!—look!—"

Savagely Reno stifled that cry, and beat down the slender hand pointing to those deadly coverts; but, prompt as was this action, it came too late, for the mischief was done!

An answering shout came from the Sparkler, and almost instantly his trusty

rifle sent bullet after bullet hurtling among the rocks, fairly driving Red Belt and the negro into the open trail, there to fight for their lives! The noble roan was now less than a hundred yards distant, running with free rein, while Shasta sat at ease in the saddle, rifle in hand.

Both negro and gambler knew that the game was up, unless the Sparkler could be killed or driven from the trail, and shouting like demons to encourage each other, both boldly stood and opened fire.

Then Shasta Sam was seen to swerve in his saddle, while a tress of his long brown hair floated gently to the earth. At the same instant his rifle cracked, and under its deadly aim the negro Eph pitched head first to the ground, a bullet through his brain.

Desperate, now that he was alone and hand to hand with the Sparkler, Red Belt spurred his horse directly across the trail, dropped his rifle, and from the revolver in each hand sent bullet after bullet at his advancing enemy.

But his nerves were shaken and his aim no aim at all. Shasta Sam dashed straight ahead, and seemingly untouched, in the face of that rapid fire!

This was more than Kent Keene could understand, and with a shout of terror he wheeled his horse and galloped madly after his fleeing ally, Rafael Reno.

Once again Shasta Sam's rifle cracked; the ball sped swift and true, and, with a single sharp gasp of pain, Kent Keene, gambler and desperado, pitched from his saddle.

The other pursuers from Blue Jacket were now in plain view, back on the trail, and as they noted the fall of Red Belt a great cheer went up, while each urged his horse to greater efforts, to be in at the death.

The other pursuers from Blue Jacket were now in plain view, back on the trail, and as they noted the fall of Red Belt a great cheer went up, while each urged his horse to greater efforts, to be in at the death.

But the struggle was to end as it had begun—single-handed! An unlucky step of Rafael Reno's madly running horse sent him down in a heap. The captive was thrown clear of the trail, and fell prostrate at the roadside, unconscious or dead, while the outlaw himself landed fairly upon his feet, to boldly face his oncoming foe.

"Stop, curse you! Stand and fight like a man!" he shouted, jerking a revolver from his belt and rapidly firing.

But once more the aim of Shasta Sam proved true and deadly, for, with the crack of his rifle Rafael Reno dropped his weapon, staggered forward, and sank upon his face in the middle of the trail.

Hardly deigning his prostrate foe a glance, Sam Shelby drew rein and dismounted, to spring eagerly to the side of Wild Nell, who, stunned by her fall, was now struggling to her feet.

Reassuring words, in tones far from steady, helped the girl to her senses, and then—

"Confound those fellows! What are they coming for, now?" Shasta laughed, in a gleeful way, as he gazed tenderly into the dark eyes of the happily blushing girl. "Just when I wanted the compact made and sealed, too!"

Wild Nell looked up the trail at the approaching riders, then tossed her head saucily, saying:

"There's time enough to think of that later, Mr. Shelby, don't you think?"

"Yes, Edith, dear; but the answer—"

"Should be what—Sam?"

"There! That's better! Yes, I should think, little one! I begin to believe you need to have some one to look after you, and—yes, I'm after the job!"

"Well, you've earned the right to it, Sam!" and Edith Estell's slender hand crept gently in the broad palm of her bold wooer.

Then both started guiltily, for a subdued burst of laughter warned them that the tete-a-tete was no longer a stolen sweet!

"Et's a puffedly safe bet ye've won fust prize, Pard Sam!" Major Marker ex-

claimed, advancing with a broad grin on his round, red face. "But, o' course, this hyar is bechuxt ther three of us. Ef mum's ther word, mum she is!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

CONCLUSION.

The return to Blue Jacket camp was in the nature of a triumphal procession.

In the van rode Judge Ichabod Estell and his blushing niece; immediately behind them were Shasta Sam and Major Marker; then many of the camp's citizens, mounted and afoot, while in the rear was Landlord Swift, in charge of a squad of men bringing in the bodies of the dead outlaws.

Rafael Reno and Kent Keene had certainly paid a severe penalty for their many crimes; but every honest man in the camp breathed easier when it was made known that with the death of these two the career of Dick Dread had ended.

The Red Raiders, too, had been sadly demoralized by that skillful night attack led by Shasta Sam, and when the tidings went forth that their leader was dead they quietly disbanded.

The intelligence that Abner Estell was at the Idaho House, and dying, was conveyed to the judge by Caleb Bledso in a few cautiously turned sentences. When the stern old father and the misguided son were brought face to face there was a scene, ending in reconciliation, and Abner Estell died with good-will in his heart for all men.

Several days passed before the camp settled down to its normal condition; then Major Marker was unanimously elected mayor. And on that very day, too, Ribbon Rob's stage brought, in the shape of a bundle of official-looking documents, tidings that the mayor had won his numerous "suits," and was at last a wealthy man!

Judge Estell, his niece Edith, and Shasta Sam, did not tarry long in Blue Jacket. They had secured all the evidence necessary to recover Ishmael Estell's property, and departed, a few days after the burial of Abner Estell, carrying with them Old Betty Moselle, whom Edith declared should remain with her while both lived.

George Gilbert—he whom we have known so well as Caleb Bledso—had proved that his desire to reform was sincere. He became manager of the Good Luck Mine, a part of the Estell estate, and something like a year after the events herein narrated wedded Lena Swift, the landlord's daughter.

And, of course, Edith Estell and Samuel Shelby, in due time, sealed the compact we have seen them make, "and ever after lived happily."

THE END.)

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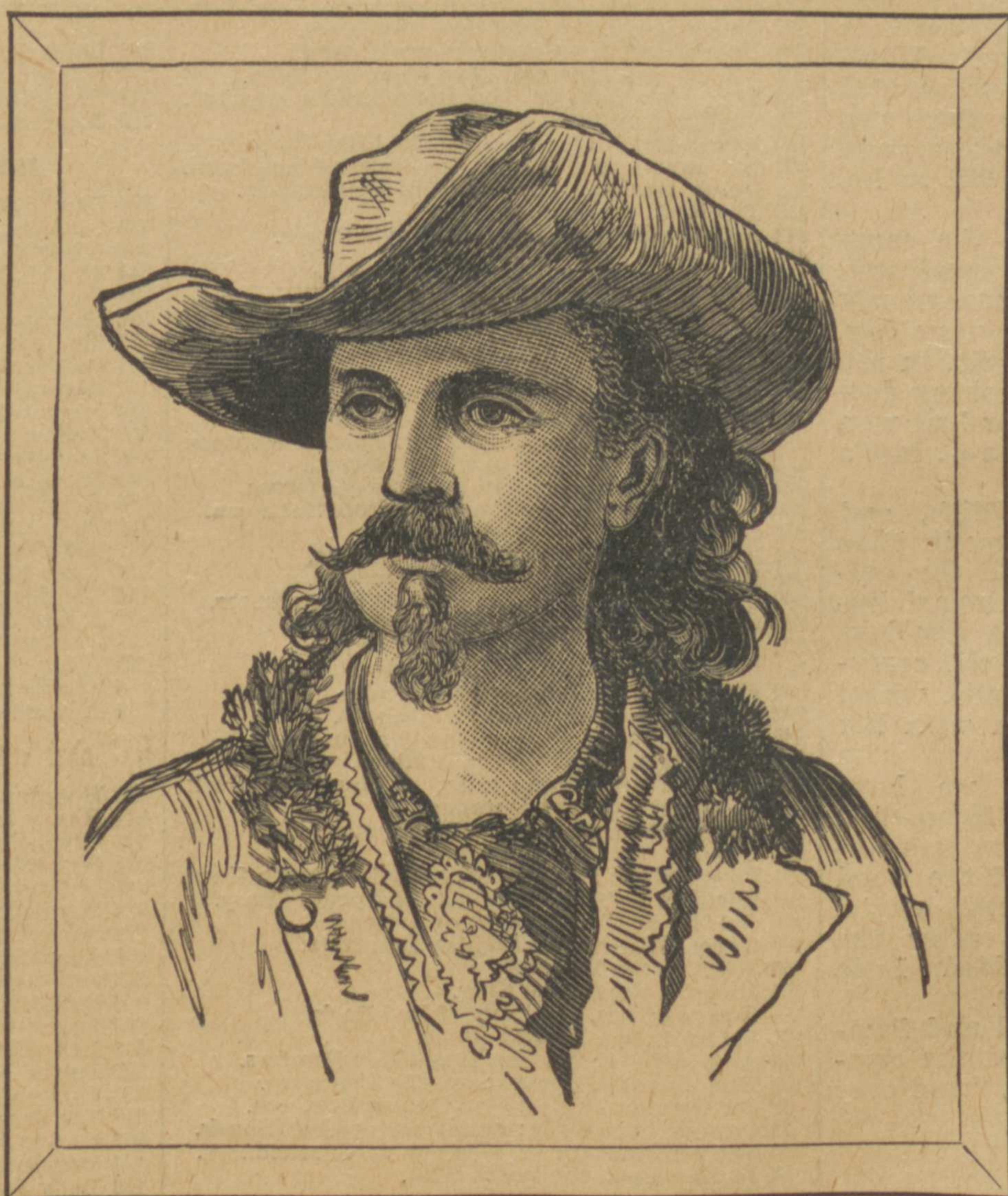
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